

John T. Flynn



Photo courtesy of Graham E. Quinn, MD.

Our profession lost one of its greatest lights with the passing of John T. Flynn, MD, on March 18, 2019. John was a graduate of Notre Dame University and received his MD from Northwestern University. He served his residency at Cornell, where he first met Dr. Ed Norton, who eventually recruited him to Miami. In 1965, following training with Dr. Cüppers and others in Europe, John joined Drs. Norton, Victor Curtin, Don Gass, and J. Lawton Smith as the fifth of the “founding five” of the Bascom Palmer Eye Institute (BPEI).

Dr. Flynn’s 35-year tenure at BPEI was marked by huge successes in clinical care, education, and research. He established the “muscle clinic” and developed an amblyopia treatment program for South Florida. He delivered extremely thoughtful, stimulating didactic lectures, sprinkled with his trademark “Take attention, boys and girls, and consider this, ...” prodding his students to think outside the box and challenge existing dogma. John was an amazing clinician and an astute examiner. He would first play with the child for a bit, quietly studying the patient and family, and by the time he had started the history, he already had a differential that included the right diagnosis.

He was also a wonderful surgical teacher. By the time I finished my fellowship, I thought that I was a pretty decent surgeon. When my first case as a faculty member did not transpire as smoothly as I had expected, I immediately realized that I was not really a great surgeon but had done well in training solely because of John’s prowess as an assistant!

Dr. Flynn was one of the world’s strongest contributors of new scientific knowledge during his time at BPEI. He confirmed the central nervous system pathology in amblyopia, studied various methods of occlusion as treatment, and effectively ended the practice of pleoptics through his extensive research in the area. It was in retinopathy of prematurity (ROP), however, that he made his greatest mark. He and Burt Kushner performed the first in vivo fluorescein angiograms of affected infants, demonstrating that the pathology in severe active disease was a high-velocity vascular shunt. Without Dr. Flynn, ROP research would never have made the leaps and bounds that it did in the last part of the 20th century. He convened experts to develop the first nomenclature, classification, and staging of the disease, allowing research to blossom after everyone was finally speaking the same language. He was instrumental in organizing the CRYO-ROP study (the first ROP research funded by the NEI), but modestly declined to be its lead investigator. John was also very active in many other ROP trials and continued work on various pharmacologic agents into the late 2000s.

Dr. Flynn accumulated many accolades during his career. He was a prolific author and an invited speaker at more than 300 venues around the world. He was a director of the American Board of Ophthalmology, and Associate Examiners will remember the hilarious video of John demonstrating how NOT to administer the oral examination. He served as president of AAPOS in 1991-92 and was inducted into the American Ophthalmological Society in 1983. John was also very active in Research to Prevent Blindness as well as several vision and neuroscience venues in South Florida.

In 2000 John left Miami to return to New York, where he became the first Anne S. Cohen Professor of Ophthalmology at Columbia University as well as vice chair of the department. He continued his ROP research and began morning rounds with the residents to discuss cases seen overnight. One Columbia resident stated that he and his colleagues “lived for” those morning rounds due not only to the incredible amount of material they learned but also for the chance to know Dr. Flynn as a person.

Despite his many professional accomplishments, John’s most powerful legacy is with the people whose lives he touched. He was greatly intrigued by neuro-ophthalmology and great friends with Joel Glaser (whom he called a “teasipper”). Former fellow Ed Buckley fondly recalls weekly Friday lunches together, where they discussed current events, “with John far to the left of everyone

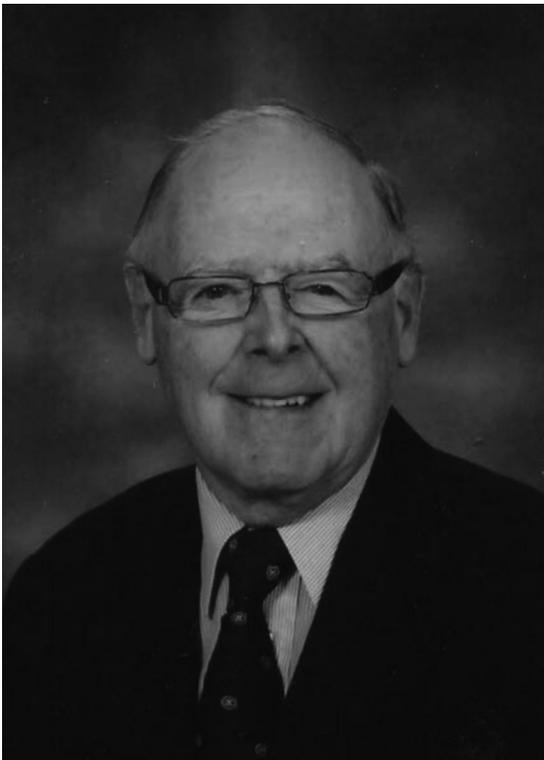
else.” His longtime and dear friend Marilyn Miller agrees and wishes she could have John’s take on current Chicago politics, stating “he would have some colorful reaction . . . with a sting in its tail.” Both Burt Kushner and Steve Christiansen recall his love for his baby blue VW beetle. Steve actually broke the passenger seat, causing great consternation, and Burt recalls that when John finally had to get rid of the car, he “mourned like most people only mourn a spouse or beloved pet’s passing.” John was a wonderful mentor to hundreds of residents and fellows. Steve Christiansen rightly states that John’s “greatest gift to his fellows was the early and undeserved trust and respect he gave us that allowed us to flourish when we felt at greatest risk of foundering.” His former Columbia colleague Michael Chiang “marveled at the range of his knowledge” and how John was “so enthusiastic about learning new skills even at age 72.” One of his favorite BPEI residents recalled

that John might seem intimidating at first but was “really a big teddy bear” when you got to know him.

For seven years I had the wonderful honor and pleasure of working alongside John Flynn. He was one of the most gifted, thoughtful, creative, and caring men I have ever met. Despite his amazing contributions and international prominence, he was unfailingly humble and incredibly generous to his students and younger colleagues. John is survived by his wife Roseanne, children Tom (also an ophthalmologist) and Ellen (a primary care physician), and numerous grandchildren. They, as well as his ophthalmologic family, shall miss him deeply, and are forever grateful for the blessing of having him in our lives.

R. Michael Siatkowski, MD

John Little



Dr. John Milton Little passed away in June 2018, just over 35 years since we crossed paths when he accepted me to work in his department at the Montreal Children’s Hospital for my final year of residency. He was to become

a lifelong friend and supporter of my career in his home town of Halifax, Canada. Indeed “JML,” as he was known to his closest colleagues, moved from Halifax to McGill university for his medical and ophthalmology studies before spending three years at University of Florida, where he worked under icons like Kaufman and Flynn to become a pediatric ophthalmologist with a subspecialty in retina. He returned to Montreal and to a long and pioneering career in that field at the Montreal Children’s Hospital, where he quickly became chief of service. That is where I met him and quickly was exposed to what was already known as the JML influence! Irishman that he was, John had a deep sense of what was right and needed to be done for his young patients. He had no time for delays or nonsensical red tape to accomplish his mission; that’s how, for example, he convinced his hospital to acquire the first ocutome in Canada to perform “modern” cataract surgeries on infants in the early ’80s. Not satisfied to respond to local professional needs, John even tirelessly made trips to other cities to help colleagues. He was more than a superb clinician: he was a community leader among his medical school graduates, in the Irish Montreal community, and in the Canadian pediatric ophthalmology community. Some would have said JML was tough. I would say he was engaged—fully so, to his last fiber. He had a big heart and a wonderful smile that let it show; and those who knew him well will attest of that, be they parents, or trainees, or colleagues. We miss him.

G. Robert La Roche, MD, FRCSC