

Society News



Dr Wilbert J. Keon

Dr Wilbert J. Keon: The Passing of a Mentor, Leader, and Legend

Dr Wilbert J. Keon is a legend in Canadian cardiovascular medicine. Of course, it is widely known that he was the Founder of the University of Ottawa Heart Institute (UOHI), as well as an engaged and effective Canadian Senator. Yet all this happened because he was a person of great skill, tremendous vision, contagious leadership, with an ability to build a strong team around him and get the job done. He was the same during surgery: a surgeon of natural abilities, around whom the entire team felt compelled to go beyond the call of duty, and whose lack of fear around technical difficulties was striking. For others, he also was a tremendous and insightful mentor, who was able to see early on in people what few others could.

As a medical student in 1993, I recall the first time that I “met” the famous man—in fact an imposter in the operating room jokingly claiming to be him, only to observe my awestruck reaction! Seven years later, as a technically facile cardiac surgery resident graduating from his division... but with only a single research paper, I was honoured to be offered by Dr Keon a staff surgeon job at “his” Heart Institute. However, he insisted—much to my dismay at the time!—that I stay out of the operating room for 2 years to do research at Harvard. Like multiple other examples, he was right and had seen in me what I had not.

For this tribute, I asked some former colleagues of Dr Keon to provide their perspective about him, which I believe provides a much more interesting point of view than just my own. Naturally central to Dr Keon’s legacy are Dr Donald Beanlands, co-founder of the UOHI, and his successors at the helm of the UOHI, Drs Robert Roberts and Thierry Mesana. Dr Pierre Bedard was his longest serving surgical colleague. Drs Andrew Pipe and James Robblee bring the unique perspectives of their Cardiac Prevention/Rehabilitation and Cardiac Anesthesia divisions. Dr Arvind Koshal went on to successfully establish and grow Dr Keon’s heart institute model in Edmonton, Alberta. Ms. Heather Sherrard, Ann Stolarik, and Susan Menzies worked beside Dr Keon for

decades, and shared many of his successes and hardships. Drs Tirone David, Hugh Scully, and Eldon Smith provide their take as, respectively, a Canadian cardiac surgery legend and leaders of key national organizations, including the Canadian Cardiovascular Society, of which Dr Keon also was President from 1988 to 1990.

Dr Donald Beanlands (co-founder of the UOHI – comments gathered by Dr Rob Beanlands)

After meeting with Dr Keon at the World Congress of Cardiology in Argentina I was inspired to come to Ottawa because of his vision for the Heart Institute and cardiac care. In 1975, I came to join Dr Keon in Ottawa. Over the years, we built a relationship of mutual trust, respect, and friendship. Dr Keon was always willing to take on the toughest cases that others would not. He always listened and respected my opinion and those of our cardiology colleagues. It was a true team-based collaborative approach to care that we developed. He was loved by the people of Ottawa, the Ottawa river valley, and the Champlain region, without whose support we could not have built the Heart Institute to what it is today. His legacy lives on through the patients for whom he cared and the UOHI staff, in particular the nurses, upon which the strong *esprit de corps* of the UOHI was built. Thanks to Dr Keon’s vision, the Ottawa Heart Institute has become not just a dream come true but an exemplary world-class institution for cardiac care in Canada, where patients are the first priority.

Dr Robert Roberts (successor to Dr Keon as President & CEO of the UOHI, 2004-2014)

Dr Keon, as its founder, made the University of Ottawa Heart Institute a Canadian icon. Willie, as he was known to most, directly or indirectly touched so many that he became a greater icon than the institute he founded. Only a very select few can claim the expertise of a surgeon, the talent of a visionary leader, the oratory of a senator, and perform all with great alacrity.

Dr Thierry Mesana (successor to Dr Keon as Chief of Cardiac Surgery, 2001-2012 and President & CEO of the UOHI, 2014-to present day)

Dr Keon dreamed of an institute that would provide the highest standard of patient-centred cardiac care to the Ottawa community and beyond. His vision resulted in the world class Ottawa Heart Institute, which is recognized internationally as a centre of excellence, combining cutting-edge cardiac care, research, and education. When it came time for him to step down as Chief of Cardiac Surgery, and I was approached to take on this role, the institute model, the “family-like” organizational culture, its strong values, and the patient-centered care approach were the fundamentals that echoed and resonated with me. I crossed the ocean to join the University of Ottawa Heart Institute 18 years ago for these very reasons. For Dr Keon we will all remain eternally grateful. He will be sorely missed by all. He was true to his dream, and we will remain true to his legacy and spirit.

Dr Pierre Bedard (cardiac surgeon and longest-serving surgical colleague of Dr Keon at the UOHI, 1976-2019)

In the mid-sixties, Dr Keon was chief resident in cardiovascular surgery at the Toronto General Hospital, and I was working with him as a junior resident. I was impressed not only by his surgical skills but as well by his personality, his knowledge, and care to the patients. At that time, there was a call room on the ninth floor where we used to meet and chat. One evening, he confided to me that, after his research year in Boston, he was to start his surgical practice in Ottawa, and that he would build a “heart institute unique in the world”! Dr Keon attracted me to join him in Ottawa upon finishing my training in 1971. By the time, he had already established a Cardiac Unit at the Ottawa Civic Hospital. His plans were to build a heart institute in various stages, because of financial constraints. In 1976, an underground floor was built with a parking lot over it. It included three operating rooms, two catheterization labs, and a recovery room. Thereafter, gradually over the years, five floors were built over the operating rooms and a research institute was added. Finally, in the spring of 2019, a new tower with the operating rooms, catheterization labs, recovery and intensive care rooms was opened.

Over the years, Dr Keon accumulated many functions, not only as a surgeon, but as well as an administrator, which has led him to be nominated at the Canadian Senate. For many years, he was the Director General of the Heart Institute and the Chairman of the Department of Surgery at the University of Ottawa. He, as well, was involved in research receiving many grants from major institutions and publishing regularly in many journals. Despite all his responsibilities, he carried a busy surgical practice and was adored by his patients.

Dr Arvind Koshal (co-founder of the University of Alberta’s Mazankowski Heart Institute)

Dr Wilbert Keon (“Willie”) was my mentor from residency training in 1975 until my retirement in 2013. He was a gifted surgeon, but also much more than that. He was a friend, a mentor, a visionary, and a leader. He was not satisfied with just being an excellent surgeon; he sought to improve cardiac

care at the local and even national level. Rather than just treat the patient in front of him, he bought into the concept of a heart institute that could provide clinical and academic cardiac care with facilities for ongoing research and education. This required far more than surgical skills; it required obtaining buy-in from various stakeholders, including university and hospital administrators, local and provincial politicians, and the public. Dr Keon somehow managed to do all of this while maintaining a busy surgical practice.

Willie was a great multitasker. In addition to his surgical practice, he held significant administrative responsibilities with the Ottawa Heart Institute, the Department of Surgery, the Medical Council of Canada, and as a Senator for the Federal government. He also participated in countless community, national, and international events. He firmly believed in the importance of providing top quality clinical care to his surrounding community and continued to operate until close to his retirement. During his career he had achieved several Canadian “firsts”, including the Jarvik total heart implant and a neonatal heart transplant. All of this significantly raised the profile of the Ottawa Heart Institute to the level of a world-class facility.

When I left Ottawa in 1991 to become Chief of Cardiac Surgery in Edmonton, I sought to follow Willie’s lead and do for Alberta what Willie did for Eastern Ontario: create a world-class heart institute. Even though I was several provinces away, I always relied on Willie for advice as to how to lead a program and develop a heart institute. He reminded me to never give up on my surgical practice to focus on hospital administration—surgery, he said, is what keeps us most closely connected with our patients and our community. Among all of his national and even international accolades, this is the one thing I admired most about Willie: his enduring focus on his patients and the people in his surrounding community. He will be missed.

Dr James Robblee (Chief of Cardiac Anesthesia at the UOHI, 1996-2011)

Willie Keon was a leader whose vision for the University of Ottawa Heart Institute included patient-centred care, teamwork, and vertical integration of cardiac services to achieve the best possible results for cardiac patient care. The vision included a Division of Cardiac Anesthesiology with personnel who dedicated their career to cardiac care and cardiac surgical critical care. This approach enabled excellence in medical education at the fellowship level and supported research in the Division.

Dr Andrew Pipe (joined UOHI in 1980; Professor and Chief, Prevention & Rehabilitation, 2003-2017)

I first met Dr Keon as a resident in 1975. His skills and his determination to ensure the highest quality cardiac care for his community were equally evident. He brought to everything that he did a “gentle tenacity” whether in the operating room or in an administrative setting where his feats to ensure the creation and development of the Heart Institute were legendary. Today many are unaware of the fundamental challenges he faced in realizing his vision. His influence is now expressed through the scores of trainees who benefited from his experience and insights, is evident in Eastern Ontario where the Heart Institute he created is an

outstanding cardiac centre. It is seen far beyond as his influence is felt in the broader national and international cardiovascular communities. In particular, his personal commitment to programmes of prevention and rehabilitation ensured that the Heart Institute became a leader in these fundamentally important areas of cardiovascular practice. He was a very gentle man with a commitment to patient care that was immediately apparent to all. His mentorship was always quietly and thoughtfully expressed, and his support was rock-solid. There are few like him.

Dr Tirone David (Distinguished University Professor, University of Toronto)

Wilbert Keon's legacy will live forever. He created a world-class heart institute in Ottawa and served Canadians as a senator for two decades. On a personal level, he supported my academic career and was instrumental to my success. I will never forget him.

Dr Hugh Scully (Professor, University of Toronto; Past-President both of the Canadian Cardiovascular Society and of the Canadian Medical Association)

Dr Wilbert Keon was one of Canada's outstanding and creative leaders in cardiovascular medicine and surgery and in health policy at the local, provincial, national, and international level. After training in cardiovascular surgery with Dr Bill Bigelow in Toronto, he was invited to create a heart surgery unit in Ottawa. Under his dedicated leadership, the Ottawa Heart Institute became and continues to be a model in cardiac care, teaching, and research. An articulate creator of the team approach to the care of cardiac patients and related teaching and research, he was one of the founders of the Cardiac Care Network in Ontario. Together with surgical peers, cardiologists, family physicians, nursing, perfusion, hospital executives, the Ministry of Health, superb research direction and support, we realized exemplary reduction in surgical wait times, surgical mortality and morbidity, shorter ICU and hospital stays, and great patient and family satisfaction. Indeed, the results for coronary artery surgery from all cardiac hospitals in Ontario became as good or better than any unit in the world.

Recognizing his commitment to the collaborative team approach to cardiac care, Wilbert Keon was elected as one of only four surgeons in 50 years to be President of the Canadian Cardiovascular Society, representing all cardiovascular specialists in Canada. Appointed to the Senate of Canada, Wilbert Keon quietly made many positive contributions to advancing constructive health policy in Canada. After retiring from the Senate, he continued to be a leading figure in the Ottawa Local Health Integration Network. I was privileged to be his friend and associate. For me and many others, he was always an honest advisor and great mentor."

Heather Sherrard (Executive Vice-President, Clinical Services, Chief Nursing Officer, UOHI 1988 to present)

Dr Keon had three principles which underpinned all that he did. Long before it was fashionable, he talked about "our

patients come first". He fundamentally believed that as much as possible patients needed to be cared for in their communities and close to home and family. Finally, he believed complex cardiac care was best delivered through a critical mass of highly specialized providers, and then supported through a network of committed partners. Those principles drove the design, size, and scope of his Institute. Again, long before people coined the term—he built a hub and spoke network where the sickest and most complex patients were cared for in the Institute, and then moved seamlessly back to their communities. He made commitments to the community partners to ensure they had timely access to care, and experts to help support knowledge transfer. Over the years, I spent many hours in communities with him. The true measure of his success came from the patients and providers of those communities who did not talk about "the Heart Institute" they talked about "Our Heart Institute".

Ann Stolarik (Nursing Care Coordinator, Cardiac Surgery, UOHI, 1995-2017)

I learned many things from Dr Keon, but one of the most important was "if you are doing something on behalf of a patient, you are never wrong". This "motto" became my mode of operation over the years and has served me very well.

He knew his staff, and knew what they were capable of, and built an environment to support their work in achieving the Institute's goals. I think one of his management strategies was "management by walking around". I never did figure out how he knew so much about us, whose son graduated from university, whose mother had died, etc. He was eminently approachable, personable, and knew many of us by our first names even when we were not wearing our required IDs. His philosophy was "why not" when you approached him with an idea or a project. You were not always sure if he heard you until you ran into him in the hall, and he asked for an update on the project.

I've worked in Minneapolis, Cleveland, Philadelphia, and Ottawa (twice) in both large university hospitals and teaching centers, and had never been exposed to the likes of Dr Keon. He was the one who invited families to come into the operating rooms (in OR garb, of course, and with a coordinator) when it was clear the patient would not survive the operation, and they wanted to be there with their loved one. He was the one who insisted that a coordinator stay with a family whose member had died, help them with any arrangements that needed to be made, and stay with them until they walked out the door of the Heart Institute (some were from across the province and others even further-which complicated the process). It meant late days, but nobody ever cared about this. In the early days, he often slept overnight at the Institute in his office if he had a patient he was particularly worried about. Staff who had been there longer than me told me of days where he slept on a stretcher in an alcove in the recovery area if he was too worried about a patient to go home. It was always about the patient and their family. He was the one who called out of the operating room to let the family know surgery would be longer because of a finding in the operating room that was unexpected, so they wouldn't be worried about the extra time surgery was taking.

He was a quiet giant of intellect, compassion, resourcefulness, and dedication.

Dr Eldon Smith (CCS Past President, Calgary, AB)

Although I have known Dr Keon for many years, I got to know him best when he was President of the Canadian Cardiovascular Society (CCS), and I was Vice President. Both were two-year terms, but Willie got appointed to the Senate in the fall of 1989—just before we were each starting our second year. I will always remember the phone call I received just a few days before the CCS Annual Meeting which was in Halifax that year. It was Willie asking if I could cover for him since he could not attend the meetings—this included the CCS Council meeting which the President chairs. Of course, I said yes, and I think we managed reasonably well. This is how I came to serve 3 years as President, although one of them was officially my Vice-President year. Willie was very grateful for my “covering” for him, and particularly that I did so without having the title of President. It was a little like asking a colleague to take clinical call for the weekend because you had something important come up. In that situation, however, one is expected to “repay” the weekend call at a later date. Willie was not able to repay, but our friendship was secure and enough for me. I was proud that he was appointed to the Senate, and pleased to cover for him—even if it was a 365 day “weekend”.

Dr Keon has made many contributions to cardiovascular care, to the CCS, and to the citizens of Canada. I will always value our friendship and many interactions. He will be missed.

Susan Menzies, MHA (Administrative Assistant 1976, to Executive VP of the UOHI, 1976-2001)

He was my boss, my mentor, my colleague and friend. Aside from my father and my husband, he is the gentleman who had the most influence on my life and career path. He was incredibly warm and compassionate, as you would expect with patients and families but, also with staff. His ability to see the potential in people, recognize talents they had, but that they themselves may not have realized, and nurturing those talents was a key to recruiting the right person for the right job and “growing” the Heart Institute to what it is today. His ability to compartmentalize his many roles and focus on the task at hand was amazing. Although he had numerous demands on his time when he was involved with a person or problem, he gave it his full attention. He was a consummate surgeon, scientist, Senator, educator and a true visionary when it came to the development and improvement of health care for Canadians. The breadth of his knowledge and expertise was recognized by invitations to be a member of, or, chair the boards of countless local, national, and international medical professional associations and health care foundations too numerous to mention. Throughout all his endeavours, he maintained his warmth, humour emphasized by his smile, and the Irish twinkle in his eye. The big picture was never lost in the daily challenges; the humble Valley boy was never lost in the fame he achieved.

His family was his rock and his joy, and his success was dependent on always knowing he had their support. His legacy is not the building that houses the Heart Institute. It is the team within the walls and beyond who continue to expand on his vision and provide exemplary care, share their knowledge and explore new advances all with the same dedication and compassion that Wilbert did.”

There is an incident that shows so many traits of Wilbert: Soon after I was hired, I asked if I could observe a surgery. The next day, I went to the operating room to watch a “reoperation” valve replacement and three bypass grafts. In 1976, it was considered a higher-risk surgery, as I am sure it is today.

I stood at the patient’s head by the anesthetist and got a “front row” seat. As Wilbert was opening the chest with the sternal saw, there was a major problem. The scar tissue from the previous surgery caused the ventricle to adhere to the interior surface of the sternum, and the left ventricle perforated. I stepped away from the head of the table. Under pressure the heart was pumping blood as high as the operating room lights. He quickly applied two fingers with gentle pressure to stop the flow, and the team swung into action, coolly, quickly, and efficiently. The patient was placed on the heart lung machine within 90 seconds, all was back under control. Wilbert looked up with concern and asked if I was alright. I had moved to the corner of the operating room so the team did not have an extra person in the way. I was fine. But it was typical of Wilbert to notice I had moved and expressed concern even when under the pressure of a surgical emergency. The patient recovered well with three grafts and a new valve and was discharged within the week.

Conclusion

Clearly, Dr Wilbert J. Keon’s impact on Canadian life not only transcended borders, but also the boundaries of medical care. He was a humanist, and his task at heart was to improve Canadian society through positive contributions centered around curtailment of its main killer: cardiovascular disease. As a husband, father, doctor, researcher, cardiac surgeon, teacher, founder, chairman, chief executive officer, mentor and Senator, Dr Keon always put present and future patients first. He successfully overcame obstacles to achieve his ambitious vision, supported the numerous team members, at all levels, who helped him in this quest, and made contributions to Canada and its population that will be ever-lasting and shall never be forgotten.

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