



Obituary of Earl Bakken

Earl Bakken 1924–2018

Warren Watson and Douglas P Zipes

Multiple obituaries have been published about Earl Bakken, founder, first CEO and chairman emeritus of the board of Medtronic, detailing the facts of his life, his many contributions and honors. The purpose of this particular obituary, written by his son-in-law (WW) and a consultant to Medtronic for 35 years (DPZ) is to show a personal side of Earl not captured in the other obituaries.

Earl founded Medtronic in 1950 in a garage (Fig. 1) where he worked repairing electronic equipment (Fig. 2).

Warren Watson

Three years after beginning my career with Medtronic, I married Earl Bakken's oldest daughter, Wendy. Earl was unlike any man I'd known. There was only one topic of conversation that interested him—Medtronic. Medtronic was his passion, his pride and joy and, I would say, his true love. Conversations with my father-in-law were generally not easy to begin but talking about anything other than Medtronic would put him to sleep. Literally!

Earl and I talked about how many patient's lives were made better by Medtronic products (ultimately measured in patients per second!), how fast the Company was growing (not revenue but number of dedicated people Medtronic employed) and how the Mission Statement Earl wrote in 1960 was still being used today without a single word changed.

In the early days of Medtronic, Earl instituted an anti-nepotism rule that prevented his family members from being employees of

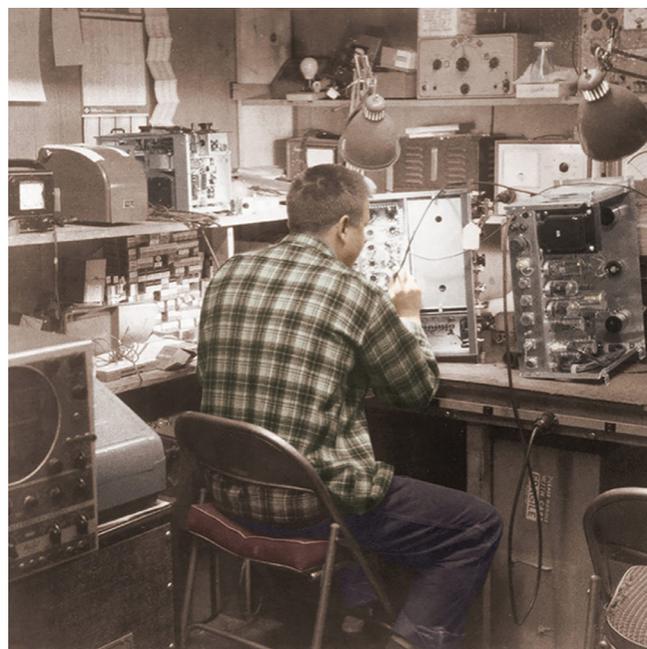


Fig. 2. Earl at his bench.

Medtronic. In my Medtronic career I did everything I could to avoid having my Medtronic colleagues and customers know that Earl was my father-in-law. Unfortunately, try as I might, I was generally unable to keep my relationship with Earl a secret.

In his last 3+ decades of life, Earl became more engaged in his newfound love helping the people of Hawaii live better lives and his conversations shifted as he shared his excitement of The Island and his many projects to help the Hawaiian people. He embraced the "aloha" spirit, and uncharacteristically but freely began using the words "I love you" when we ended our visits. Rather than waking up to the news about Medtronic, Earl would go to a garden outside his bedroom and admire the beautiful flowers. He called it his "church". More and more of his time was spent with his family with fewer and fewer business meetings.

In the end, Wendy and I were holding his hand as he breathed his last breath and I witnessed the passing of the greatest man I'd ever known.

Douglas P Zipes

I was fortunate to meet Earl shortly after starting to consult for Medtronic in 1975. In addition to helping people worldwide,



The garage where Medtronic began

Fig. 1. Original Medtronic "headquarters."

Earl has been a source of inspiration and support for me personally.

In 1980, we shared a seat on a tour bus in Jerusalem where we were both attending a cardiology meeting. I mentioned to Earl that the fast-growing specialty of cardiac electrophysiology needed a basic textbook for learners and practitioners. Would Medtronic sponsor such an effort? In a heartbeat Earl's response was, "Absolutely. Go for it."

Around the same time, Gordon Moe was retiring as head of the Masonic Medical Research Laboratory. José (Pepe) Jalife suggested we hold a retirement party for him. I thought, why not have a retirement party to which we'd invite leaders in cardiac electrophysiology from around the world, with the requirement that they write and bring with them a chapter summarizing advances in their specific area. We'd then edit the chapters into a textbook.

I went to Earl. Would Medtronic support the symposium and the book? Earl gave the go-ahead and in May 1984 Gordon enjoyed a unique retirement bash at the *Amelia Island International Symposium on Cardiac Arrhythmias*. The meeting gave birth to our first textbook, *Cardiac Electrophysiology and Arrhythmias*, published by Grune & Stratton. That book paved the way for the first edition of *Cardiac Electrophysiology. From Cell to Bedside*, published by Saunders in 1990, now in its 8th edition.

Earl retired from Medtronic in 1989 and built a home in the Kona District of Hawaii using only local workers and supplies. Once established in his new residence, he raised money for and founded the North Hawaii Community Hospital—the first hospital in the area. Prior to his death at age 94, he still supported the hospital, which focused on the patient with a "high tech, high touch" atmosphere. (Fig. 3)



Fig. 3. Earl in Hawaii.

WW and DPZ

Earl was one of the world's genuine humanitarians—an honest-to-goodness good guy. He dedicated the mission of his company and his own personal resources to the benefit of the patient, to physicians caring for those patients, and to young learners all over the world. We will miss him—the world will miss him!

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