



Long Standing Physician and Otologic Pioneer Leaves Lasting Impression on Patients and Profession

By Lori L. Livengood

If asked, many of Dr. Richard Cummings' patients would likely say he made a lasting impression on their lives. When you ask Cummings what lasting impression he has made, he quickly glosses over the advancements in ear treatment he brought to the Wichita community.

"I think I've given a service to many people, but there's no lasting impression because new medical advancements are always becoming available," Cummings said. "I may have changed a few people's lives by giving them some hearing, but another qualified doctor can always come in and take care of them."

The Wichita Ear Clinic and his partners will continue to care for Dr. Cummings' patients as he prepares to retire after 40 years of practice in Wichita. During his four decades, Cummings introduced a number of new diagnostic and surgical procedures to Wichita patients. He was the first in the area to perform stapedectomy surgery, correcting abnormal ear bone growth - a common cause of hearing loss. In 1986, he was also the first in the region to perform cochlear implant surgery where a device is inserted to directly stimulate the nerve endings of the inner ear. Yet, Cummings does not consider either of these impressive firsts to be his greatest accomplishment.

"My greatest accomplishment is being able to keep interested, enthusiastic and active in my whole 40 years of practice in Wichita," he said.

Cummings stumbled onto the idea of being a physician while looking through a book of occupations as a senior at Blaine Rural High School in Blaine, Kan.

He earned his bachelor of arts degree from the University of Kansas in 1954 and entered medical school at the KU Medical Center in Lawrence, completing his degree in 1957. Cummings' childhood influenced his decision to specialize in otology.

"I didn't develop language until the third or fourth grade because of hearing loss," he said. "It was a good field for me because it was something I had a special interest in."

Cummings' personal background also influenced his decision to change the focus of the Wichita Ear Clinic to strictly ears when he took over as director in 1979. Founded in 1893 by Dr. Jacob Dorsey, former Clinic directors include Dr. Ernest Seydell and Dr. Joseph Budetti. As director of the only Kansas clinic to specialize in ears, Cummings has maintained a patient-focused approach to care.

"I treat every patient like they were my own brother or sister," he said. "I try to make life more pleasant for them while they are here."

Even if he refuses to recognize his lasting impression on patients, members of Cummings' staff recognize how his leadership has influenced their personal and professional lives. According to partners Dr. Thomas Kryzer and Dr. John Lasak, Cummings' compassionate means of treating patients and his years of experience in treating ear disease and dizzy patients have influenced their careers. Dr. Jeff Moore, Clinic director and audiologist, said he follows Cummings' example of doing your best at whatever you are doing.

"I have been told there are five people during a lifetime that are responsible for major changes

that occur in one's life. Dr. Cummings is definitely one of those people for me," Moore said. "I feel he challenged me to not only become a better audiologist but also a better person."

Cummings is no stranger to challenges, but the type he faced early in his career have been made easier due to changes in the medical field. Technological advances such as the MRI and optical microscope have improved diagnostic procedures and made inner ear surgery possible. According to Cummings, the greatest change resulted from the disappearance of childhood diseases such as polio and diphtheria.

"We experience a tremendous amount of better health because of the lack of infectious diseases," Cummings said.

To keep the community apprised of medical advances, especially in relation to ears, Cummings utilized radio shows on KFH-AM, 1330 during the late 1970s and again in the mid-'90s. He also addressed issues facing the deaf and hearing impaired as a governor appointed member of the Kansas Commission for the Deaf and Hearing Impaired from 1988-91 and as a member of the Kansas State Board of Healing Arts from 1981-83. Cummings also served the medical community as past president of the St. Francis and St. Joseph medical staff in 1974 and 1990, respectively, as well as president of several county and state medical societies, including the Sedgwick County Medical Society in 1978 and Kansas Ear Nose and Throat Society from 1972-73.

Beside Cummings involvement with medical organizations, he has served on numerous educational and community boards of directors. A proud Jayhawk, he has served as alumni representative for the KU Athletic Corporation Board and as member of the KU Alumni Association, serving as Chair in 1995. His extreme loyalty and dedication to KU earned Cummings the Fred Ellsworth Medallion in 1998. Though always loyal to his alma mater, Cummings has also served on the Newman University Board of Directors. In addition, he has been active in the Wichita Rotary Club and Chamber of Commerce since the 1970s.

"I am more active in community organizations than most physicians," Cummings said. "It is easy to get so involved in medical organizations that you don't see the other organizations."

When not working in the office or attending a board meeting, Cummings plays golf or travels with his family - in order to play golf. Self-described as an "avid, but not good" golfer, he claims eight hole-in-ones and defines playing golf in Ireland as something "very special."

"Camping or fishing was not good for a doctor before the advent of cellular phones," he said. "With golf, they can still get in touch with you."

Sometimes described as an art collector, Cummings has donated art to local organizations and still enjoys going to museums. However, his days of purchasing expensive art pieces have passed.

"I am still interested in art, but I don't collect it anymore," he said. "I would rather put my money into my grandkids."

Spending time with his wife, Laura, three sons and one daughter, and 14 grandchildren is one of the few things Cummings already has planned for his retirement. Other plans include attending KU and Wichita State basketball games. Beyond that, he still is uncertain. For the past 40 years, Cummings spent four or five nights in January planning his vacations and professional activities for the year. He treats retirement no differently.

"I think in January I will sit down and see what I can do," he said. "I'll probably lie about golf and brag about grandkids. I am entering my reflective years and we have a farm we enjoy, so I'll probably go and watch the weeds grow."

Cummings could certainly reflect on the medical services he has provided to the Wichita community, the new treatments he brought to the state of Kansas and the numerous organizations he's helped to lead. However, the people he met along the way remain in the forefront of his mind.

"I hope I have made a lasting impression on the friends and people I have met," Cummings said. "We are like pieces of sand out on the beach: Alone we're not much, but together we can make a difference."