

Lawrence H. Cohn, MD

(1937–2016)

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On 8 January 2016, the field of cardiothoracic surgery had to say goodbye to one of the greatest cardiac surgeons, innovators, and educators of our time, Lawrence H. Cohn. In his more than 50 years of experience as a cardiothoracic surgeon, Dr. Cohn revolutionized the use of minimally invasive procedures to repair and replace heart valves, contributing immensely to the field.

Dr. Cohn's impact on the field is difficult to summarize. He performed more than 11,000 operations and was profiled in 2015 in the *Journal of Thoracic Disease*,¹ which described him as a "Master of Masters in cardiac surgery." Highlights of his contributions include authoring more than 440 original scientific publications, including the standard textbook *Cardiac Surgery in the Adult*, 2nd and 3rd editions, the most

referenced text in adult cardiac surgery today. Dr. Cohn was part of the team for New England's first heart transplantation in 1984, which took place at Brigham and Women's Hospital, Dr. Cohn's home for 45 years.² Furthermore, Dr. Cohn received a Doctor Honoris Causa from the University of Paris in 1992, and in 2005 he was the recipient of the Paul Dudley White Award, the highest honor presented by the American Heart Association.³

Lawrence Harvey Cohn was born on 11 March 1937, in San Francisco. He received his Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of California, Berkeley, with honors in 1958. In 1962, he received his medical degree from Stanford University School of Medicine with Alpha Omega Alpha distinction.³ While at Stanford, Dr. Cohn met Dr. Norman Shumway, the 67th president of the American Association for Thoracic Surgery (AATS), who urged Dr. Cohn to pursue a career as a cardiothoracic surgeon, instructing him to "go around the world, get all of your training and boards, and then come back and train with me," to complete his education as a cardiothoracic surgeon.⁴ Dr. Cohn followed this advice exactly, leaving California to complete his internship and junior assistant residency in surgery on the Harvard Surgical Service at Boston City Hospital. After that, he spent 2 years in the laboratory at the National Institutes of Health, researching the medical physiology of cardiovascular disease. He returned to the West Coast to complete his general surgery residency at the University of California, San Francisco. Thereafter, he entered the Stanford University cardiothoracic surgery residency program in 1969.

After finishing his cardiothoracic training in 1971, Dr. Cohn was pulled again to the East Coast after being recruited by Drs. John Collins and Francis Moore of Peter Bent Brigham Hospital to join their group in Boston, in the hope that he would transform the way that cardiothoracic surgery was done at Brigham.⁴ Transform it he did, and Dr. Cohn spent the rest of his career there, becoming an expert in mini-



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mally invasive vascular surgery, focusing on improving outcome measures and simplifying the way that procedures were performed. He was appointed a professor of surgery at Harvard Medical School in 1980, and from 1987 to 2005 he served as director of the Cardiothoracic Surgery Residency Program at Brigham and Women's Hospital/Children's Hospital Medical Center. He received an honorary master's degree in medicine from Harvard in 1999, and in 2000 he was awarded the Virginia and James Hubbard Chair in Cardiac Surgery. From 2000 to 2004, he served as chair of the Brigham and Women's Physician Organization. In addition, he served as Physician Director of Medical Device Technology for Partners HealthCare, a nonprofit hospital and physicians' network within the Boston area.⁵

In addition to his work in surgery, Dr. Cohn was an avid supporter of the arts and cultural scene in Boston. He served on the board of the Boston Public Library Foundation, was an active member of the Museum of Fine Arts, and supported the Boston Symphony Orchestra. In addition, he was a trustee of Massachusetts Financial Services (a mutual fund company) and was on the board of the Boys and Girls Club of Boston.⁶

Dr. Cohn is survived by his wife, Roberta, and 2 daughters, Leslie Bernstein and Jennifer Cohn. As his friends and family would confirm, Dr. Cohn had a deep love and a lifelong passion for golf. He approached the game with the same vigor and concentration that he showed in performing complex cardiac surgery. During the last decade, he established what became known as the "LCI" (the Larry Cohn Invitational Tournament). For those of us who participated, it was a yearly event—spanning a few days—of exercise, camaraderie, and adult libations. Playing with Dr. Cohn was a unique experience, because he was always full of humor, wit, and extravagant stories. At such times, he was perpetually kind, gracious, and a consummate gentleman.

As a tie-in with my own institution, Baylor College of Medicine, Dr. Cohn presented Dr. Michael E. DeBakey with the AATS Scientific Achievement Award in 1999.⁶ In a "Conversation with the Editor" piece in the *American Journal of Cardiology* in 2006,⁴ Dr. Cohn described both Dr. DeBakey and Dr. Denton Cooley as two of the greats in the field of cardiac surgery, which is especially meaningful given that both physicians' careers extended over the same long, eventful period of cardiac surgical history as Dr. Cohn's own.

His title "Master of Masters" was bestowed upon him because of his lifelong role as an educator: Dr. Cohn was responsible for training more than 150 residents and fellows in the Brigham and Women's Hospital/Children's Hospital Medical Center Cardiothoracic Residency Program. Dr. Cohn's leadership was often carried on to the next generation, as the residents he trained went on to lead cardiothoracic surgical divisions across the country and around the world.⁶ In addition, he served

on the American Board of Thoracic Surgery and the boards of the American College of Cardiology and the American College of Chest Physicians. Most notably, he was the 79th president of the AATS.

In his 1999 AATS Presidential Address, titled "What the Cardiothoracic Surgeon of the Twenty-First Century Ought to Be," Dr. Cohn outlined a list of 11 qualities that cardiothoracic surgeons of the 21st century should strive to possess⁷:

1. Be an excellent surgeon
2. Be a physiologist
3. Be an excellent teacher
4. Be very knowledgeable about the economics of health care
5. Be well versed in digital technology
6. Be knowledgeable, if not expert, about advances in surgical technology
7. Be a leader
8. Be adaptable
9. Be persistent
10. Have a good sense of the history of our specialty
11. Above all, be a humanist

There is no doubt that Dr. Cohn embodied fully all 11 of these qualities.

Acknowledgment

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