

In Memoriam:

James T. Willerson, MD

(1939–2020)

Strange is our situation here on Earth. Each of us comes for a short visit, not knowing why, yet sometimes seeming to divine a purpose. From the standpoint of daily life, however, there is one thing we do know, that man is here for the sake of other men—above all those upon whose smiles and well-being our own happiness depends.

— Albert Einstein

Dr. Willerson used this quote to eulogize Dr. Denton A. Cooley, his role model and the founder of the Texas Heart Institute (THI). But I cannot think of anyone more deserving of this description than Dr. Willerson himself. With deep sadness, we mourn the death of an extraordinary physician, scientist, innovator, and friend—James T. “Jim” Willerson, MD—on 16 September 2020. He will be greatly missed.

“The patient first” was a phrase Dr. Willerson often used when addressing graduating physicians. It perfectly encapsulated his view of the world. With his fervent compassion, great intellect, and encyclopedic medical knowledge, he was the epitome of a master clinician. His commitment to patient care, along with his work ethic, can only be aspired to by the rest of us.

However, Dr. Willerson had more than compassion. He was driven to discover, innovate, and advance scientific knowledge in the service of others. His intensity, filtered through his calm demeanor and soft voice, was relentless: he never took “no” for an answer. These qualities helped him to achieve international renown as an investigator and educator.

Born in Lampasas, Texas, to physician parents on 16 November 1939, Jim Willerson grew up in San Antonio. He attended the Texas Military Institute, where he was battalion commander, senior class president, and editor of the school newspaper. In addition, as captain of the varsity swimming team, he won 5 first-place awards and earned a 4-year swimming scholarship to the University of Texas (UT) at Austin. There, he lettered in swimming, joined the Texas Cowboys honorary student organization, and graduated Phi Beta Kappa. He graduated with Alpha Omega Alpha distinction from Baylor College of Medicine (BCM) in Houston. Dr. Willerson completed his postgraduate training at the Harvard Medical School and the Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston.

Dr. Willerson’s extraordinary professional accomplishments cannot be fully detailed here. In 1972, he was recruited to the UT Southwestern Medical School in Dallas as an assistant professor of Medicine and as director of the coronary care unit at Parkland Hospital. He was promoted to professor of Internal Medicine and director of



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the cardiology division at UT Southwestern, where that position bears his name today: the James T. Willerson, MD, Distinguished Chair in Cardiovascular Diseases. He returned to Houston in 1989 to be chairman of Internal Medicine at the UT Medical School and director of the cardiology research programs at THI. In 2001, he became president of the UT Health Science Center in Houston. He was selected to succeed Dr. Denton Cooley as president of THI in 2008, and he served as president emeritus from 2017 until his death.

Prominent among his accomplishments was his influence as editor-in-chief of *Circulation*, then the largest journal of the American Heart Association (AHA). During his 11-year tenure that began in 1993, he transformed *Circulation* from a monthly publication into a weekly beacon of timely and relevant clinical and basic scientific discoveries, with enduring status as a top-tier cardiovascular journal. In 2008, Dr. Willerson became editor-in-chief of the *Texas Heart Institute Journal*.

Among Dr. Willerson's myriad honors and awards were his presidency of the Paul Dudley White Society alumni association at Massachusetts General Hospital; the AHA's James Herrick Award (1993) and the AHA's highest honor, the Gold Heart Award (2005); and the Ray C. Fish Award of THI (2009). He was elected to membership in the Institution of Medicine (now the National Academy of Medicine) in 1999. He was named Distinguished Scientist by 2 organizations: the American College of Cardiology (2000) and the AHA (2002). In 2017, UT named the Willerson Center for Cardiovascular Modeling and Simulation, the top cardiovascular research center at the Oden Institute for Computational Engineering and Sciences, in his honor.

Dr. Willerson authored or coauthored 29 textbooks on cardiovascular medicine and more than 1,000 scientific publications. He held 14 patents. His major scientific contributions included identifying the mechanisms

that cause the conversion of coronary heart disease from stable to unstable plaque, and detecting and treating these vulnerable atherosclerotic areas. His work also contributed to the discovery of genes and proteins responsible for cardiovascular disease, and to the use of stem cells in treating patients who have heart failure.

An enthusiastic sports fan, Dr. Willerson closely followed all aspects of UT athletics, and in fact a UT swimming scholarship was named in his honor. During his induction into the UT Men's Athletics Hall of Honor in 2009, he was thrilled to be given one of the top prizes for any UT Longhorn athlete, the T-ring, which never left his finger. Moreover, that ring, his cowboy boots emblazoned with the THI symbol of excellence, his Hermès tie, and the gold stethoscope around his neck were legendary as his signature look.

Jim Willerson was a man of strong spiritual beliefs, and a loving father and grandfather. Surviving him are his former wife, Nancy Beamer Willerson; daughters Sara Willerson and Dr. Amy Willerson (husband, Thomas Suerth); and grandchildren James, Grace, and Thomas Suerth.

With Dr. Willerson's passing, THI has lost a great leader and a giant of cardiovascular medicine. The outpouring of tributes from physicians and colleagues worldwide testifies to his contributions in cardiovascular science and to his role in educating and mentoring medical students and young physicians. I was one of those lucky ones, and I am forever indebted to him for helping to mold me into the physician and scientist that I am today.

*Emerson C. Perin, MD, PhD,
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Houston*