

Editorial

In Memoriam: Michael R. Nihill, MBBS (1936-2023)

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On February 10, 2023, Dr Michael Nihill passed away peacefully at the age of 87 years. Those who were lucky enough to know him knew he was truly one of a kind.

Born in 1936 in Haberfield, Australia, Dr Nihill completed his medical degree, internship, and pediatric residency in Sydney and then traveled to London, England, to work as a postgraduate student in internal medicine. Reflecting on this piece of his history, he once reported in typical fashion, “I took a job as the doctor on a cargo ship—at 10 cents a month—but I got free passage. It was there in London that I became interested in pediatric cardiology and decided to come to the States for further training.” In 1968, Dr Nihill started a fellowship in pediatric cardiology at Texas Children's Hospital in Houston, Texas. After completing his training, he returned to Australia in 1971 for a short spell before finally settling in Houston, where he stayed until his retirement from Texas Children's Hospital in 2017.

Dr Nihill made an enormous impact in Houston while working side by side with some of the legends in the field, including Drs Daniel McNamara, Denton Cooley, Charles Mullins, Timothy Bricker, Charles Fraser Jr, James Willerson, and Robert Hall. Dr Nihill's dedication to teaching and his impeccable skills in physical examination and cardiac catheterization were unmatched.

During his 46 years at Texas Children's Hospital, Dr Nihill cared for thousands of children and was recognized as a master clinician. His exceptional physical examination acumen was second to none, as he started in pediatric cardiology in the era before the widespread use of echocardiography. In addition, Dr Nihill's technical skills and creativity in the cardiac catheterization laboratory were phenomenal, as he worked alongside Dr Charles Mullins, a true pioneer in the use of cardiac catheterization for diagnosing and treating congenital heart disease. Furthermore, the trainee (ranging from the medical student to the resident and the pediatric cardiology fellow) who was fortunate enough to be taught by Dr Nihill benefitted from his comprehensive, classic, “patient-centric” style. Using this approach, he emphasized the importance of performing the physical examination, reviewing patient data, and having a thoughtful discussion about the differential diagnosis and possible treatment options.

Dr Nihill's legacy lives on in the teaching of cardiology fellows. He was known for softly uttering his “Nihill-isms” in that unmistakable Australian lilt, accompanied by a wry smile. One of his favorites was to stop at a door and say, “Age before beauty,” while allowing the fellows to enter through the door first. The echocardiographers were amused by his frequent use of the term “echo-schmecho” on rounds, highlighting his true identity as an interventionalist. Another of Dr Nihill's favorite witticisms was, “To cath is to cure.”



Michael R. Nihill, MBBS

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Dr Nihill was a truly unique figure who had a tremendous impact on his patients' lives and in whose light we basked while we had him. What differentiated him from all others was not just his exceptional clinical acumen, catheterization skills, or cardiology knowledge, but his kindness, warmth, and remarkable humanity. We celebrate his legacy and his wonderful, well-lived life.

Dr Michael Nihill is survived by his wife of 57 years, Ilsa Nihill; his daughter Amanda; his sister and brother, Caroline and John; and his grandchildren, Thomas and Ella. His daughter Alisen passed away in July 2022.

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