

NEWS RELEASE

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS SOUTHWESTERN MEDICAL SCHOOL AT DALLAS



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DALLAS -- A mutual admiration society between a medical professor and his student flock that has been in session longer than the school itself is about to adjourn at The University of Texas Southwestern Medical School at Dallas.

The affectionate "association," whose membership includes some 4,000 physicians, educators, dentists and pharmacists, won't disband--it was never formally organized in the first place. But the exclusive coterie will stop acquiring new members when its focal figure, Dr. Robert W. Lackey, retires from the medical school faculty at the end of the current term after a career in science education spanning nearly half a century.

Dr. Lackey has been a professor of physiology at Southwestern since its doors opened in 1943, and has taught virtually all the 2,000-plus graduates in its 25-year history. Before that, he instructed hundreds of students at the medical, dental and pharmaceutical branches of Baylor University in Dallas, beginning in 1925.

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first add lackey

During this time the gentle, scholarly professor has retained a fascinated regard for his extraordinary brood. The response of his students, associates and a distinguished parade of alumni shows the feeling has been entirely mutual.

Some 120 of Dr. Lackey's colleagues, former students and friends will formally honor the retiring educator Saturday (May 10) at a dinner at 8 p.m. at the Chapparal Club. Dr. Milton Davis, Dallas surgeon and former student of Dr. Lackey, will be toastmaster.

Others paying tribute will be Dr. Carl Bunde, former physiology professor at Southwestern and longtime faculty colleague, and Dr. Howard L. Gravett, who worked closely with Dr. Lackey when the latter served as assistant dean for student and curricular affairs at Southwestern, 1954-65.

A gold-plated drum of a kymograph, a machine that records laboratory data, will be presented to Dr. Lackey listing highlights of his career.

Looking back over that remarkable career--the longest of anyone still active in medical education in North Texas--the 69-year-old Dr. Lackey finds his work has been constantly challenging and only occasionally frustrating.

The constant association with so exceptional a group of young people has been his principal source of satisfaction, Dr. Lackey said.

"Teaching in a medical school, you spend a major portion of your waking hours with people who are far from a cross section of the community--you are dealing with an exceptional group. It is an inspiration to meet and try to teach people who have a real purpose, who know what they want and are going for it."

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second add lackey

If it weren't for his contacts outside the classroom and laboratory, he observed wryly, he might never have known what average people are like.

The extent of his rapport with his students is constantly reflected in comment from his ex-students. Typical are the observations of Dr. Ann Hughes, one of some 40 of Dr. Lackey's admiring exes who are now on the faculty at Southwestern.

"He lives and breathes teaching," she said. "He has always demanded a great deal--but you got a great deal from him. And always there was a twinkle in his eye--even when he was sort of chewing you out. He always gave you the impression he was interested in you as a whole person--not just as a student.

"He taught us a lot about the importance of being a human being. And he taught as much by example as by anything he said."

Dr. Lackey has a farflung reputation as a joke-teller who liked to punctuate his incisive science lectures with shaggy-dog type stories. But he says his classroom jokes have mostly gone by the boards--casualties of a changing educational landscape.

The explosion of scientific knowledge has so crowded available lecture time that there is no longer "slack" time to be taken up by an occasional story to "enliven things if students get drowsy." And the more sophisticated students of today no longer need the reassurance of an ice-breaking joke from the teacher.

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third add lackey

"Once many students were afraid of their instructors and hesitant to approach them," he said. Today's students don't need to be assured that the professor is human."

One stock stunt that Dr. Lackey continued is a "gasser."

For years he has chosen a husky, deep-voiced male student for an invariably sure-fire gag. Concocting a ruse, he suggests the student count aloud to test his comprehension of elapsed time. Then he asks him to inhale a quantity of helium gas and repeat the process.

The lighter-than-air gas temporarily alters the resonance of the vocal chords, turning the basso profundo into a shocked soprano--to the vast merriment of the rest of the class.

"It teaches them something about the properties of helium, too," he adds with typical twinkle.

The lot of the teacher has improved dramatically in the past four decades, Dr. Lackey observes--and so has the calibre of his students.

"Salaries of teachers have become much more equitable--even in relation to inflation--than they were even a few years ago."

"A teacher should be rewarded in proportion to the amount of preparation required to get where he is." Today, he said, experience and educational background are more fully recognized.

And the students have improved in quality, too.

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fourth add lackey

"The best students today are about as good as 15 years ago," he said, "But there are many more of the good, strong ones today. And they all have better basic background and with training have acquired an increasing capacity to perform."

One reason the median level of performance is higher is the heightened competition among applicants for the available medical school openings.

"Today there are 1,100 applications for 105 annual openings at (Southwestern). Ten years ago there were less than 500 applicants." Medical school administrators, while planning expansion in their schools' capacity, have no choice but to be increasingly choosy in selecting students --and therein lies one of the chief frustrations Dr. Lackey has experienced.

In some 20 years on Southwestern's admissions committee, Dr. Lackey has seen many potentially talented aspiring physicians fall by the wayside in the scholastic competition.

"One of the greatest frustrations is to see so many that show a spark of promise but have to be turned away," he said.

A major improvement in medical education has been in giving medical students more free time away from laboratories and classes--attendance at lectures is not mandatory--so they may spend more hours reading in independent study.

Lectures are generally recorded these days, he explained with enterprising students taking turns providing their classmates a complete transcript--for a fee, of course.

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fifth add lackey

Foremost among the problems a science teacher must cope with is the vast proliferation of knowledge and technical data, Dr. Lackey says. A reflection of this is the trend toward more guest lectures by experts in a specialized area within a scientific discipline, with no one individual responsible for all lectures on a given general subject.

"Forty years ago," the professor noted, "a teacher had a much heavier class load. One man had to do all the lectures in a course. And he didn't have time to do any research."

What about the current relationship of teaching and research?

"There are some instances when a person may so narrow his interest (in research) as to limit his interest and effectiveness in his overall teaching field," he said, "but generally speaking the discipline of continued research makes him a better teacher."

Dr. Lackey has had more than two dozen papers published in his own area of research interest, carbohydrate metabolism. He has explored in detail the factors influencing storage of carbohydrates in the heart muscle and differences in the ratios of their storage there and in the body's skeletal muscles.

The genial professor will spend "about a year" after retirement writing up additional research data--"a chore" deferred during earlier experimentation. He and Mrs. Lackey, who reside at 6600 Thackery, plan to "do some traveling," and Dr. Lackey will pursue a favorite hobby, hunting. But only small game.

"I can't bring myself to shoot a deer."