

Media Contact: Russell Rian
Cell: 817-891-1733
russell.rian@utsouthwestern.edu

Dr. Gary Purdue, nationally known burn surgeon at UT Southwestern, dies in motorcycle crash

DALLAS – Oct. 3, 2010 – Dr. Gary F. Purdue, 65, chief of the burn section in the Department of Surgery at UT Southwestern Medical Center and co-director of the Parkland Memorial Hospital burn unit for 22 years, died this morning in a motorcycle crash.

A past president of the American Burn Association, Dr. Purdue was a nationally recognized burn specialist who was instrumental in leading the burn section at UT Southwestern and the burn unit at Parkland into national prominence. Parkland has one of the largest burn units in the nation, where UT Southwestern physicians care for almost 1,000 burn victims annually.

“Dr. Purdue was an outstanding clinician, educator and role model,” said Dr. Bruce Meyer, executive vice president for health system affairs at UT Southwestern. “This is a truly tragic, senseless loss for not only his family and the UT Southwestern and Parkland communities, but also for the citizens of North Texas and all the thousands of patients whose lives he touched.”

Dr. Purdue, who grew up in Elmira, N.Y., attended evening classes to start his medical degree and worked as a paramedic for the volunteer fire department of Youngwood, Pa. Just before entering medical school, his father was electrocuted aboard a sailboat after touching an open wire, which reinforced his desire to pursue his dream of becoming a doctor.

Dr. Purdue received his M.D. from Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia in 1976 and completed his general surgery residency at Mercy Hospital in Pittsburgh in 1981.

Following a fellowship in burn surgery at UT Southwestern, he joined the faculty in July 1982 as an assistant professor and was promoted to professor in September 1994. He became chief of the burn section in 1994. He also was director of the Surgical Network Information Processing System (SNIPS) for the department.

“Gary Purdue was not only an excellent burn surgeon, but he also was a superb educator who was recognized by medical students and resident trainees with numerous teaching awards,” noted Dr. Robert Rege, chairman of surgery. “He was the consummate role model for young physicians, because he practiced medicine with the highest ethical standards. More importantly, he was a compassionate physician who always put his patient's needs first. His mentorship and advice will be sorely missed by all of us, from the first year medical student to the seasoned professor.”

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In addition to being the former president of the American Burn Association, he was a member of the International Society for Burn Injuries, American Association for the Surgery of Trauma, Society of Critical Care Medicine and a fellow of the American College of Surgeons.

Parkland named Dr. Purdue the Distinguished Physician of the Year, along with Dr. John Hunt, professor of burn/trauma/critical care and co-director of the Parkland burn unit, in 1998 in recognition of their outstanding commitment to the healing process. He received the first annual Laycock-Snyder Teaching Award in 1996 and again received the award in 2007.

“Gary was a great teacher, mentor, clinician and surgeon. I can’t say enough about him. There isn’t too much he hasn’t put his stamp on in the burn unit,” Dr. Hunt said. “He was extremely conscientious about his patients and expressed compassion and empathy. He always made a point of speaking with families before and after surgery.”

In addition to his medical interests, Dr. Purdue and his wife, Laurel, aided the Gladney Center for Adoption by caring for 39 infants awaiting adoption. Dr. Purdue was a devoted husband and father. He is survived by his spouse of 32 years; daughter, Heather; sons, Ian, Keith and Kyle; grandson, Luke; and two additional grandchildren expected in the next six months. He planned to retire in a few years.

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