

January 5, 2014

Kansas City, Missouri

It was after a long day in the operating room and clinic that I settled at my desk to read my email when I learned of the death of a great friend, mentor, and hero—John W. V. Cordice, MD, FACS. Though he was 95 years of age the news came as a surprise because of my recent conversation with him by phone from New York (he had called me) and the absence of any immediately life-threatening condition at the time. In fact, Dr. Cordice was busy in his home that November day packing up items in preparation for a move from he and his wife's big 3-story home Hollis Queens (where they had lived for 60 years) to Sioux City, Iowa to live close to his oldest daughter who resides there. He had given me his new address to have become effective on November 23, 2013. He was very proud that his granddaughter was anticipating matriculation at medical school at the University of Iowa. In that conversation that day it seemed to be important to both of us that some information on the history of surgery, that he had been so much a part of, would be preserved. We had enjoyed a number of conversations over the years about his life as a thoracic surgeon at Harlem Hospital and later in Queens in New York City. He seemed so pleased to have made the friendship of someone so enamored as I was with the history of surgery at Harlem Hospital and in the country during a fascinating time in American Surgery. I am extremely honored, humbled, and blessed to have had the great opportunity to know this humble giant of small physical stature and to have been entrusted by him with a story for the history books and a tale of the ages. I pray that I can do justice to passing on the oral history I got from him.

I have once given in a lecture before the Surgery Section of the National Medical Association, in some detail, Dr. Cordice's corroborated story of the September 25, 1958 operation on the then young civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. at Harlem Hospital in New York. Many who will read this note will recall many of the details of the story in my presentation. In this relatively brief communication, I will only discuss it briefly in the context of the life of the man I eulogize today. John and I had planned to talk again, with my pen and pad in hand, once he got settled in Sioux City; and we had even contemplated my travel to Sioux City to visit him prior to my next move from Kansas City later this month. On our agenda was to be more details of what surgical practice was like in Harlem and in Queens and their contrasts, and about the major surgical diseases of the time and their presentations as compared to common presentations today. He was preparing some documentation from the Harlem and Queens years to copy for me to keep in the archives of the Surgery Section of the NMA and SBAS. Conversations with him were always so vivid, so educational, so enjoyable, and so long! I greatly regret that we did not get to that planned conversation or meeting.

Dr. Cordice was born on June 16, 1919 in North Carolina. His mother had been a teacher at Bennett College and his father was a physician general practitioner in Greensboro, N.C. before they settled in Durham. He considered himself to have been very fortunate to have been able to attend college at New York University in Washman Square (1936-1939) (3.5 years to graduation) where there were only 4 or 5 other black students in his undergraduate class. He immediately went on to medical school at NYU and was in the accelerated graduating class of December, 1943 (accelerated due to the medical manpower needs of World War II). He joined the Army Air Corps that same month (another item on our planned future agenda was to highlight his specific duties during the War). He was honorably discharged from military service and went to Harlem Hospital as an intern in 1946 and started his surgical residency

under Dr. Louis Wright (“Mr. Harlem Hospital”) in 1947, finishing in 1952. He then pursued his interest in thoracic surgery. He was offered the thoracic residency at Harlem, but due to some unpleasant interpersonal interactions with Dr. Wright during his general surgery residency, he accepted the opportunity to go to the University of Paris where he described a phenomenal experience for one year. He then returned to New York where he trained an additional 3 years in thoracic surgery at King’s County Hospital in Brooklyn under Dr. Clarence Dennis, Chief of Surgery.

He spent a couple years in private practice around New York before he was hired by Aubre de L. Maynard, MD (Director of Surgery at Harlem Hospital 1952-1967) in the summer of 1958, just a few weeks before Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. arrived in the hospital emergency room with a steel letter opener in his chest.

Young Dr. Cordice in 1958 was one of fewer than a handful of black surgeons trained and Boarded in thoracic surgery. Dr. Cordice may have been only the second black surgeon in American history (after Frederick Douglass Stubbs, MD) to have successfully completed the requirements for certification by the American Board of Thoracic Surgery.

When Dr. King arrived at Harlem Hospital from the department store in Harlem (at which he was stabbed by a deranged black woman) where he had been signing autographs of his new book about the civil rights struggle in Montgomery, Alabama and throughout the South, Dr. Cordice was clearly the most well-trained thoracic surgeon (despite the considerable experience of other general surgeons there caring for chest trauma). It was what happened there that day on September 25 that has been the source of legend and myth. It must be attributed to John W. V. Cordice that the true story of what transpired in the operating room upon which a thoracotomy was performed on the most well-known American Civil Rights worker of our time was kept an honorable secret for some 44 years out of deference to and respect for a senior colleague. This was an act of humility, selflessness, and courage known to few. Only after Dr. Maynard died at age 97 in 1999 did Dr. Cordice, aging himself and concerned about his longevity following his new diagnosis of prostate cancer, decide that the record should be corrected. It was Dr. Cordice, with Dr. Emil Naclerio as assistant, that performed the thoracotomy on Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. None of the participants in that 1958 operation on one of the most famous people in history ever leaked the truth or broke the common pledge made by all of them to not reveal that the credit taken for the saving of Dr. King’s life by Dr. Maynard was a fabrication. Only Dr. Emil Naclerio and Dr. Leo Maitland had taken the secret to their graves. Even Mrs. Coretta Scott King kept the story a secret. (Dr. King himself was aware of the truth and expressed the closeness the two had developed as a result of his life-saving operation by Dr. Cordice and Dr. Naclerio in a letter to Dr. Cordice on March 21, 1960) (I have a copy of the letter in my possession). All the other participants were alive at the time they consented for Dr. Cordice to right the record in a book published in 2002 by Hugh Pearson (deceased 2005). Dr. Cordice emphasized to me over and over again that he only wanted the record to be correct for historical purposes. He had never been interested in any personal aggrandizement. Other than the interviews he gave to Hugh Pearson for the book, no other public presentations or interviews were ever given by Dr. Cordice. His intent and plan was to put it all to paper for reading after his death. I hope that I can obtain his hand-written notes and memoirs. My presentation to the Surgery Section of the NMA several years ago was the first public presentation and was given with the specific permission of Dr. Cordice. This story came as a revelation to the Surgery Department at Morehouse School of Medicine where an honorary lectureship had been established in honor of Dr. Aubre de L. Maynard as the “surgeon who saved MLK.” Dr. Maynard had only come into the

operating suite after the chest was opened and was given the opportunity to remove the blade impaled in the upper left chest adjacent to the innominant vein and the arch of the aorta with penetration of the pericardium.

Dr. John Cordice was a prolific surgeon during his time. He was active in practice beyond his 80<sup>th</sup> year and remained active in the medical affairs of New York through work with the New York Board of Health well into his 9<sup>th</sup> decade. He once served as Chief of Cardiac and Thoracic Surgery at Harlem Hospital after it came under the governance of Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons in the 1960s as well as Chief of Surgery at Queens Hospital. He was an active member of the New York University Medical Alumni Association and a career-long member of the volunteer faculty of the Department of Surgery at NYU where he participated in the education of medical students. He was an early black Fellow of the American College of Surgeons and a member of the American Association for Thoracic Surgery. On March 28, 1965 he gave a presentation on “Chest Trauma with Pneumothorax and Hemothorax” before the AATS which included Dr. King’s case (anonymous) amongst 507 cases in his experience at Harlem Hospital. He analyzed 49 deaths as to cause, preventability, and error in diagnosis and management. He was a senior member of the Surgical Section of the NMA and the New York Chapter of the American College of Surgeons. In 2010 he gave a testimonial at the National Healthy People Consortium Meeting and Public Hearing in Washington, DC representing the United Black Men of Queens.

Dr. Cordice held great respect and admiration for the generation of black surgeons he saw evolving in the modern era. He felt so proud to have had a career that influenced so many of us. In a letter to Dr. David Jacobs (Executive Director of the Surgery Section of the NMA) on May 18, 2013 Dr. Cordice wrote, “I’m sorry my current age (93 yrs) and some impairments do not permit me to continue activity with the Surgery Section of the NMA, but I remain proud and happy to continue to identify with the high standards and performance of the membership.” He also expressed to me on several occasions his tremendous respect for the activities of the Society of Black Academic Surgeons and regretted that his advancing years did not allow him to be a productive member of that organization.

The life of John W. V. Cordice reminds me that “the courage we desire and prize is not the courage to die decently but to live manfully” and that, “in the end, it’s not the years of life that count; it’s the life in the years” (Abraham Lincoln). May this great man and great surgeon and his example long be remembered.

Dear John, now you can seize the day; now you can have your say.

In loving memory,

Frederick D. Cason, MD, FACS

Historian and Archivist

Surgery Section of the National Medical Association