A Tribute to Rodger J. Winn, MD

by William T. McGivney, PhD

Our world has lost a good, caring, and dedicated man; a husband, father, grandfather, doctor, and leader. Rodger J. Winn, MD, died a few weeks ago, after fighting the good fight against esophageal cancer.

My earliest remembrance of the good Dr. Winn was walking down the cavernous halls of an American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO) meeting. I had not "grown up" in the world of oncology, so Rodger set out to introduce me. I marveled that we could not travel more than 3 steps when a colleague, friend, or student would greet Rodger warmly and pause for a few moments to catch up. Watching Rodger then and through the years made me realize that while he may not be President of ASCO, he certainly was the long-term "Mayor of ASCO".

Rodger moved earnestly and with ease and grace among the many constituencies of the oncology community. People looked up to this jovial, short, stocky man for leadership. He was a master at dissolving and resolving differences and bringing groups together in ways that would benefit patients. Nowhere was this leadership and skill more evident than in the development of the NCCN Clinical Practice Guidelines in Oncology.

Dr. Winn is the "Father of the NCCN Guidelines." Recognizing the needs to address variability in oncology practice and affirm a scientific, evidentiary basis for practice, he led and nurtured a guideline program that has become the most successful, important, and influential of any of the 35,000 attempts at developing, communicating, and implementing guidelines in medicine. Dr. Winn's leadership, drive, and commitment resulted in guidelines that are the standard for the practice of oncology in the United States. They have been embraced and applied widely in both community and academic practices, and indeed, around the globe.

How did Rodger accomplish this great task? Certainly the time was right for a guidelines program that could provide up-to-date information to those making the decisions that would affect outcomes for patients with cancer. But there were also mountains of publications to understand, strong personalities and egos to manage, different clinical disciplines to integrate, skepticism about the potential impact of guidelines, and hundreds of clinical issues to address.

Simply, Dr. Winn was the right person for the right job because it would help patients receive higher quality, more appropriate, and more effective care. Rodger had held leadership positions in both community practice and academics. He was Associate Professor of Clinical Medicine at the prestigious University of Texas M. D. Anderson Cancer Center. His intellect, ability to crystallize and clarify issues, and capacity to cite the literature and apply it to everyday practice decisions in a commonsense way were all key. But Rodger was also a storyteller extraordinaire, a person with almost insatiable intellectual curiosity, and a true Renaissance man. He was smart, affable, and kind, and he could at once disarm and endear himself to the boldest skeptic and the most strident, opinionated, and aloof of individuals. Most importantly, he led and he succeeded because, in all the long deliberations, he always saw clearly the faces of patients in need. He knew what patients needed and what therefore needed to be done.

Rodger J. Winn was born on March 10, 1938, in Dublin, Ireland. We used to joke that he was more Irish than I was. He graduated from Harvard and then Jefferson Medical College. He was a fellow at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center and then served in the U.S. Army, finishing with the rank of Major. He returned to Memorial Sloan-Kettering as an attending physician and then moved to community practice in New Jersey. A few short years later, in 1982, Rodger was elected President of the New Jersey Medical College and a fellowship in oncology at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York. Dr. Winn died on April 4, 2007, of complications from esophageal cancer. He will be greatly missed. A further memoriam to Dr. Winn is on page 469.
Jersey Oncology Society. From 1983 to 1987, he served on the U.S. Food and Drug Administration’s Oncology Drug Advisory Committee.

In 1985, he responded to the challenge of building a strong relationship and research program with community oncologists in Texas and moved to M. D. Anderson. By 1991, Dr. Winn was President of the Texas Society of Medical Oncology. In 1995, he started the NCCN Guidelines program, and he served the NCCN in many capacities, including as the first editor-in-chief for JNCCN. In his later years, Rodger turned to the challenge of transforming guidelines into quality measures to help improve the quality of care available to patients.

Most importantly, Rodger was a family man. He loved and was ever dedicated to his wife, Tricia. He loved and was so proud of his daughter, Amanda, and his son, Matthew. He cherished his young grandchildren.

Patients with cancer need answers, comfort, good treatment, hope, kind words, and continuing support. Rodger Winn was the perfect doctor for these patients. But there had to be, and was, more. His energy, dedication, and vision drove him to lead efforts that have helped improve the quality and effectiveness of care for all patients, not only in the United States, but across the world.

Rodger Winn was a generous, humble, accomplished gentleman.

Thank you Mr. President, thank you Mr. Chairman, thank you Editor-in-Chief, thank you Mr. Mayor, thank you Dr. Winn, thank you so much, Rodger!

William McGivney and Rodger Winn