Dr. Thomas K. Hunt MD, FACS Obituary

Dr. Thomas K. Hunt MD, an internationally known and respected surgeon, professor and researcher, has died at the age of 88. “TK” or “Papa Tom,” as he was known by colleagues and family, was a general surgeon at the University of California from 1964 until 2001. He was best known for helping develop the trauma unit at San Francisco General Hospital and for his research on the cellular biology of wound healing. His easy-to-implement ideas shaped the standard of care for the prevention of infections after surgery. The cause of death was complications from a fall and broken hip.

Born in Evanston, Ill., Dr. Hunt was raised in Depression-era poverty with his beloved sister Eleanore. His mother, a Swedish émigré, was a schoolteacher named Mildred Lundeen Hunt, and his father, Frederick Barton Hunt, was a US Coast Guard Lieutenant and builder of church organs. During those years he decided, while operating on his teddy bear, that he would grow up to be a surgeon.

Dr. Hunt was such a gifted student that in his senior year at Main Township High School the principal called him in to announce that he should go to Harvard. When Dr. Hunt protested they couldn’t possibly afford a private college, the principal merely replied, “Son, have you heard of scholarships? You apply and I’ll take care of the rest.”

That same year Dr. Hunt joined his father, by then a Master Mariner, as first mate aboard a Navy destroyer escort that had been refashioned into a luxury yacht. The job was to bring the ship from Lake Huron down the Mississippi River to New Orleans, out the gulf, then around South America to Rio de Janeiro for the new owner, a wealthy Brazilian. It was a wild adventure that included stormy seas off the coast of Cuba that nearly swept him overboard, a knife fight on shore, a visit to post-revolutionary Haiti and finally Carnaval in Rio.

At the end of the journey, he flew back to Chicago aboard a prop plane to find a letter inviting him to interview for Harvard the following morning with a dozen of the city’s biggest names. Without a proper suit, he showed up in khakis and told the tales of where he’d been. “I apologized for my clothing and told the story... I saw smiles on their faces and after half an hour I came out and said to myself, ‘If I didn’t know better, I’m going to be at Harvard next year,’” he later recalled.
Stunned by the rigorous curriculum, Dr. Hunt worked himself into exhaustion several times during the college years and made Dean’s List most semesters. He worked so hard, in fact, that a classmate in his second year Organic Chemistry class tried to hijack his final exam by erasing Dr. Hunt’s name and putting his own to take advantage of the better grade. Dr. Hunt got an A on the exam; the other student was expelled.

One of Dr. Hunt’s fondest memories of Harvard was being tutored by comedic musician Tom Lehrer in mathematics, whom he credits with getting him a good enough grade to graduate Phi Beta Kappa in 1952 and advance to Harvard Medical School.

During medical school Dr. Hunt met Evelyn Maria Schnabel on a blind date. Two years later under a full moon during a snowy weekend of skiing, he proposed marriage. They were married at St. James Church in New York City in June and remained together for 62 years, raising three children and a succession of Golden Retrievers.

After graduating from medical school in 1956, Dr. Hunt did his internship at Boston City Hospital under famed surgeon J. Englebert Dunphy MD, then was drafted into the US Army where he served as a medical officer. He followed Dunphy to the University of Oregon and completed his residency there in 1964, then did a year-long research fellowship in Glasgow, Scotland, where he worked on methods to infuse hyperbaric oxygen into tissue to aid the healing of surgical wounds.

Dr. Hunt joined the staff at UCSF in 1965, where he also became Director of the Wound Healing Laboratory in the Department of General Surgery and Vice Chairman for Research Affairs for the Department of Surgery. In addition, he was an adjunct professor of surgery at Ohio State University and a consulting surgeon at the University of Tübingen in Germany. He also was the founding President of the Wound Healing Society, served on the Board of Directors of the Wound Healing Foundation, Undersea and Hyperbaric Medical Society, and as President of the American Trauma Society, in addition to countless honors from universities and organizations across the globe.
More importantly, patients knew Dr. Hunt as a compassionate and understanding physician with a calm and caring bedside manner. Colleagues often described him as brilliant yet modest.

Among many other international odysseys, Dr. Hunt taught surgery in Southeast Asia for the James IV Association of Surgeons. While in Vietnam, the State Department appointed him Civilian Chief of Surgery for one Saigon hospital and he got out just weeks before the fall of the city.

Research was one of Dr. Hunt’s passions and he loved teaching residents and fellows in his lab at UCSF until he closed it in 2003. That laboratory produced more than 425 research papers and his works are cited in more than 20,000 others according to Research Gate. He also co-authored four books on the healing of wounds.

Dr. Hunt’s ideas were notable for their simplicity and practicality: he proved that simply applying oxygen, warmth, fluids, vasodilation and pain relief could substantially reduce infections and improve healing. These inexpensive and easy-to-implement ideas eventually became fundamental to post-surgical infection prevention programs.

“Tom Hunt was a giant in the world of wound healing,” said Annette Wysocki, past president of the Wound Healing Foundation. “Equally as important as the research and teaching that Tom did, was the way he provided mentorship and inclusivity to the next generation of junior postdocs, faculty and scholars.”

Despite his demanding professional workload, Dr. Hunt made time for family backpacking trips in the summer and ski weekends in the winter. Until back pain prevented it, he was usually up for a game of tennis with the kids; and some of his proudest moments were when each of his children beat him in swimming races across the pool or performed in their school band concerts. He was a warm and loving father who taught by example that hard work is its own reward, and that honesty and integrity are the cornerstone of self-respect. The Hunt household at times was like an international hotel for postdocs, bringing the entire family an awareness of other worlds and cultures that his children honor to this day.

Dr. Hunt is survived by his wife, Evelyn Hunt JD, a retired attorney specializing in Employment Law, and his sister Eleanore Vail of Oxford, OH, a retired music teacher for Earlham College in Indiana. He also is survived by three children: Thomas K Hunt MD and his wife Sharon Smith MD, both of Anchorage, AK; daughter Karyn Ellis and her husband John Ellis, both of Woodside, CA; and Christopher B Hunt and his wife Nona Liang of London, England. In addition, he is survived
by nine grandchildren: Tyler Knight Hunt-Smith of Bozeman, MT; Taryn Tenaya Hunt-Smith of Hanover, NH; Peter Ellis of Woodside, CA; Victoria Ellis of Portland, OR; Evyn Ellis of Woodside, CA; JK Hunt of Stanford, CA; Bryce Hunt of Middletown, CT; Ryan and Siena Hunt of London, England.

There is no memorial planned at this time. In lieu of flowers, the family requests donations to the Union of Concerned Scientists or the Lewy Body Dementia Association.