

## In memoriam

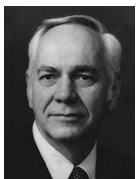
### John Kelly Duckworth, MD 1928-2023

December 2023—John Kelly Duckworth, MD, a member of the CAP Board of Governors from 1987 to 1993, died on Sept. 14 at age 95.

Dr. Duckworth was the second chair of the CAP Commission on Laboratory Accreditation. He also was chair of the Council on Practice Management, vice chair of the Council on Scientific Affairs, and a member of the Council on Quality Assurance and the Informatics, Laboratory Fiscal Management, and Finance committees.

After working as a general practitioner in Missouri, Dr. Duckworth moved to Memphis to study pathology. He began working at Methodist hospitals in Memphis in 1965 and retired as director of laboratories in 1980. He soon took on other roles and worked until about age 85.

“He used to say, ‘I failed at retirement four times,’” says Charles R. Handorf, MD, PhD, who met Dr. Duckworth when he transferred to Methodist’s residency program as a second-year resident. When Dr. Handorf became chair of the Department of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine at the University of Tennessee Health Science Center, he hired Dr. Duckworth, at the time in his early 80s, to direct the residency program. “He gave me the first job I ever had. I gave him the last job he ever had.”



Dr. Duckworth

During the Reagan administration, Dr. Duckworth was appointed assistant to U.S. surgeon general C. Everett Koop. He also served on the scientific advisory board of the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology and helped establish the National Museum of Health and Medicine.

“His impact on the whole world of laboratory medicine, not just in America, was immeasurable,” says Dr. Handorf, who credits Dr. Duckworth and a group of “young, firebrand pathologists” in the CAP with what the CAP Laboratory Accreditation Program would become.

Paul Bachner, MD, past chair of the Department of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine at the University of Kentucky, says from his perspective as a then-rookie regional commissioner, Dr. Duckworth was a “spectacular chair” of the Commission on Laboratory Accreditation and played a major role in developing and revising standards.

“Dr. Duckworth was a true Southern gentleman—articulate, kind, polite, caring, and insightful,” Dr. Bachner says. “He chaired the commission with energy and understanding. But when he stood up and put both of his hands on the table, you knew he was about to deliver a very strong message to someone or something.”

“He was a mentor to me and to so many others and one of the most memorable leaders of the CAP that I have known.”

“He was the apotheosis of the laboratory director,” says Edward O. Uthman, MD. “He’s that by which every other lab director is measured.”

Dr. Uthman, former laboratory director at OakBend Medical Center in Richmond, Tex., got to know Dr. Duckworth when he did rotations at Methodist Hospital between 1977 and 1981. He later worked for him as a pathology instructor at the University of Tennessee College of Medicine, where Dr. Duckworth was vice chair. "He hired me for my first job out of residency," Dr. Uthman says.

"There's no way I could duplicate his abilities and success, but he was certainly worthy of emulation," Dr. Uthman said. "Everything I tried to do as a laboratory director was strongly influenced by him."

Dr. Duckworth was organized and knew how to delegate, he says, but it was his follow-up that set him apart. During a meeting with him, "he'd give you something to do, and he would write it down and date it. Six weeks later he would come back and say, 'Did you do this?' And you'd better have done it."

"If you did what you were supposed to do," Dr. Handorf says, "John was the kindest, most gracious mentor there ever was. The only thing that really made him mad was if you didn't keep the patient's welfare first in mind. That would make him furious."

If someone's performance in the laboratory fell short, Dr. Duckworth worked through the chain of command, Dr. Uthman says. "He could walk through the lab and see somebody doing something really wrong, and he would never react right then." He went to his office and called in the supervisor for that area. "He never made a scene or embarrassed people, so even people who screwed up still had great respect for him and liked him," Dr. Uthman says. "He made laboratorians better laboratorians."

Stephen Sarewitz, MD, a longtime leader in the accreditation program, knew Dr. Duckworth as "a brilliant, charismatic, incredibly energetic, and personable leader who was dedicated to better patient care through quality laboratory medicine as promoted by the CAP Laboratory Accreditation Program."

"We are all standing on his shoulders," he says.

Dr. Duckworth was a pilot, and he and Dr. Handorf would fly to small hospitals. "Before we got in an airplane he was going to fly, he would walk around it three times, always with a checklist in hand," much like those of the accreditation program. Dr. Handorf recalls once teasing him. "He looked over his half glasses at me—you'd know you were on thin ice—and said, 'Charles, there are old pilots and there are bold pilots, but there are no old, bold pilots.'"

Dr. Duckworth lived by the Bible verse printed on the back of his business card: "To whom much is given, much will be required." Says Dr. Handorf: "He expected a lot of himself and of those around him. He expected people to give back, and that's probably the thing I'll remember most about him."

Dr. Duckworth received the CAP's Frank W. Hartman Memorial Award in 1982, the first Major General Joseph M. Blumberg Award for Outstanding Contributions to the Laboratory Accreditation Program in 1995, and the Lifetime Achievement Award in 2012.

He is survived by his five children, 12 grandchildren, and two great-grandchildren. His wife, Norma Jean Glover Duckworth, died in 2012.

—Amy Carpenter