

Original Article

ISDE Presidential Biography: David B. Skinner, MD

M. K. Ferguson

Department of Surgery, The University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois, USA

SUMMARY. Dr. David Skinner, the 4th President of the ISDE, was a world-renowned surgeon, educator, scholar, and leader. He participated in the formation of the ISDE, hosted two international congresses in 1983 and 1989, and made important advances in the ISDE during his presidential tenure 1992–1995.

KEY WORDS: antireflux surgery, Barrett's esophagus, benign esophageal diseases, cancer esophagus surgery.

TEXT

David Bernt Skinner, MD, the 4th President of the ISDE, was a renowned surgeon, scholar, teacher, mentor, and administrator. He was born in Joliet, Illinois, in 1935, and grew up in rural Iowa. He obtained his undergraduate degree from Rochester University, graduating second in his class behind only his future wife, May Elinor (Ellie) Tisher. He subsequently graduated from Yale Medical School (in 3 years) and did his general and cardiothoracic training at Massachusetts General Hospital. As part of his training he spent time as a senior registrar at Frenchay Hospital in Bristol, England. His supervisor there, Mr. Ronald Belsey, became a lifelong mentor and friend.

After completing his training, Dr. Skinner spent 2 years in the Air Force doing research on cardiac assist devices, and then was appointed as Assistant Professor at Johns Hopkins in 1968. He rose to full Professor after an astonishing 4 years. He subsequently was appointed Professor and Chairman of the Department of Surgery at The University of Chicago at the young age of 37, where he spent 15 fruitful years.

During his tenure in Chicago, Dr. Skinner (Fig. 1) resurrected a struggling Department of Surgery and fashioned it into one of the leading departments in the US. He was known for his fearless surgical expertise, operating on the general surgery, vascular surgery, and thoracic surgery service patients, always with his main focus on esophageal diseases. He had recognized expertise in treating both benign malignant conditions of the esophagus.



Fig. 1 Dr. David B. Skinner.

He and Dr. Tom DeMeester established a clinical esophageal function laboratory, through which many of the international leaders in esophageal surgery rotated as fellows early in their careers. Mr. Belsey spent 6 months per year for a decade working with

Address correspondence to: Mark K. Ferguson, MD, Department of Surgery, Section of Thoracic Surgery, The University of Chicago, 5841 S. Maryland Avenue, MC 5047, Chicago, IL 60637 USA. Email: mferguso@bsd.uchicago.edu



Fig. 2 Left to right, Drs. DeMeester and Skinner and Mr. Belsey in an operating room at The University of Chicago.

the surgical trainees and esophageal fellows at the University of Chicago (Fig. 2). These activities helped nurture an international fraternity of surgeons that bolstered the growth of the ISDE in its early years. Dr. Skinner's level of scholarship was admirable, and he developed 14 department chairmen and many more division chiefs during his chairmanship.

Following his successful clinical career in Baltimore and Chicago, in 1987 Dr. Skinner was named CEO of New York Hospital, which at the time was affiliated exclusively with Cornell University. Although he continued to operate for several years, his focus was on reversing the financial misfortunes of the institution and on building a modern health care facility, which culminated in a \$170 million expansion of the building over the FDR Drive along the East River. Dr. Skinner was also responsible for organizing the merger in 1998 between New York Hospital and Presbyterian Hospital, the latter of which was previously affiliated exclusively with Columbia University. This entity is now one of the largest hospitals in the United States. Dr. Skinner retired from his administrative duties in 1999.

Dr. Skinner was an early and strong supporter of developing an international community of physicians devoted to esophageal diseases. He attended the meeting of the 1st International Conference of Esophageal Diseases in Milan in 1980, which was organized by Prof. Sergio Stipa. This took place the same year Prof. Nakayama held the first conference in Tokyo that was intended to establish an esophageal society, the ISDE. Dr. Skinner's obvious enthusiasm for these formative groups was evident, as was his leadership. As a result, the 2nd International Conference of Esophageal Diseases was held in his hometown of Chicago in 1983, sponsored by Drs. Skinner and DeMeester. The proceedings of the meeting were

published as *Esophageal Disorders: Pathophysiology and Therapy*, edited by Drs. Skinner and DeMeester. The two international groups merged in 1983, and the first combined meeting was held in Munich in 1986.

The 4th World Congress of the ISDE was held in Chicago in 1989 and was hosted by Dr. Skinner and colleagues. It attracted a large international attendance, and the proceedings were published in two volumes: *Diseases of the Esophagus Volume 1—Malignant Diseases* and *Diseases of the Esophagus Volume 2—Benign Diseases*. There was general agreement that the ISDE was on firm footing at the conclusion of this congress.

In 1992 Dr. Skinner was elected to a 3-year term as ISDE President, succeeding Prof. J. Rudiger Siewert. During his tenure the journal *Gullett*, edited by Prof. Glyn Jamieson, was incorporated into *Diseases of the Esophagus*. At this time, Prof. Siewert was named the editor of the journal, replacing the outgoing editor Prof. Stipa. Dr. Skinner arranged for his mentor, Mr. Ronald Belsey, to deliver a lecture on the important historical steps in clinical esophagology during the 1995 Congress in Milan. Dr. Skinner's message to that Congress focused on the need for a wider representation of members from outside of surgery, including gastroenterology, oncology, pediatrics, and basic sciences.

Dr. Skinner was devoted to his church, the Boy Scouts, and especially to his family. He and Ellie raised 4 daughters, 3 of whom became practicing surgeons, which is testament to the energy with which he pursued his career. Dr. Skinner died at the age of 67 in early 2003 after suffering a massive cerebral hemorrhage. He will be remembered for his consistent good humor, enthusiasm in supporting the careers of others, major surgical and administrative accomplishments, and love of his family and friends.