Remembering: J. Donald M. Gass, M.D.

Dr. Meena Chakrabarti MS

J. Donald M. Gass, M.D., professor of Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences, Emeritus, and one of the world’s most respected experts on diseases of the retina, macula and uvea, died at home on Feb. 26. He was 76.

After medical school, he served an internship at the University of Iowa, then his residency at the Wilmer Institute at Johns Hopkins Hospital and a fellowship at the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology. In 1963 he joined the faculty of the newly established Bascom Palmer Eye Institute at the University of Miami Medical School, where he stayed for 32 years. When he and his wife, Margy Ann, moved back to Nashville in 1995 to be near their daughter and her family, he joined the faculty at Vanderbilt.

Dr. Gass began his career practicing general ophthalmology, and during this time became actively involved in ocular surgery for cataract, glaucoma, orbital and retinal diseases. He became interested in the new technique of fluoroscein angiography that for the first time permitted the detailed photographic study of physiological as well as anatomical changes in the retina and choroid. This new technique and his skills in ocular pathology led to his future clinical and research interests in degenerative inflammatory and neoplastic diseases of the inner eye. He is also the author of “Stereoscopic Atlas of Macular Diseases: Diagnosis and Treatment,” the premier medical textbook on macular diseases. One of his main efforts has been simply sorting the many inflammatory disorders of the eye that appear similar in nature, but have very different causes and outcomes. Previously they were either unrecognized or lumped together under less specific names.

He is also well known for his work in finding the link between acute zonal occult outer retinopathy (AZOOR) and other retinal syndromes and in the treatment of diffuse unilateral subacute neuroretinitis. The disease, common in tropical areas, is caused by a worm that

In 1999, Dr. Gass, a 1950 graduate of Vanderbilt University and a 1957 graduate of Vanderbilt University School of Medicine, was named one of the 10 most influential ophthalmologists of the 20th century by the American Society of Cataract and Refractive Surgery. The designation came from a poll of nearly 33,000 ophthalmologists around the world.

A native of Williamson County, Dr. Gass was the son of R.S. Gass, M.D., a tuberculosis specialist for whom a building was named at the former Middle Tennessee Chest Disease Hospital. After graduating from Vanderbilt University, Dr. Gass was obligated to spend three years in the Navy, which he spent in Korea and Japan, before returning home to attend medical school at Vanderbilt. When he graduated in 1957, he was awarded the school’s Founder’s Medal, given to the student with the highest academic standing.
gains entrance into the bloodstream, invading the area between the retina and choroid and causing severe vision loss in one eye.

Not just literally but figuratively, Don Gass wrote the book on blinding macular diseases, and in tackling this subject he took on an unusually difficult task,” O’Day said. When he began his work in the early 1960s, the tools he had to work with were primitive or non-existent, yet he opened up the field so effectively with his discoveries that it became attractive to a whole new cohort of other bright minds, many of whom he trained and who now continue his work.

In the two academic institutions where Donald Gass spent his professional career he was much loved by faculty, residents, fellows and staff, and above all by his patients, for whom he did so much. The image that will forever endure with many is the one they saw every week. It is of a man sitting, surrounded by colleagues, residents, students and fellows. All are peering at photographs of the retina and the conversation is animated — all are engaged.

In addition to the “influential ophthalmologist” honor, Dr. Gass received numerous awards throughout his career, including the 1987 establishment of the Gass Medal in his honor by the Macula Society, given for outstanding contribution in Macular Disease. He also received the Distinguished Faculty Scholar Award at the University of Miami in 1989; the Mildred Weisenfeld Award for Excellence in Ophthalmology in 1999 from the American Association for Research and Vision in Ophthalmology; the Helen Keller Prize for Vision Research in 2001; the Laureate Recognition Award of the American Academy of Ophthalmology in 2004; and the Vanderbilt University School of Medicine Distinguished Alumnus Award in 2004. He also served as director of the American Board of Ophthalmology from 1976 through 1983.

“Don Gass was the premier retina specialist in the world,” said Paul Sternberg Jr., M.D., George W. Hale Professor of Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences and chair of the department. “He had a remarkable ability to unravel the complexities of numerous retinal conditions, paving the way for innovative treatments. As a teacher he was unparalleled, captivating both the young resident and the seasoned specialist with his encyclopedic grasp of the field, as well as his charming recollections of the patients from whom he made his observations,” he said.

“As an academician, his textbook, nicknamed ‘the Gass Atlas,’ has become a must read for every ophthalmologist in training and a well-worn standard on all of our bookshelves. As a person, he was humble, soft spoken and delightfully absent minded. His decision to spend his retirement working at the Vanderbilt Eye Institute was an incredibly generous gift to all of us who worked with him and learned from him, as well as to the many patients of Middle Tennessee who benefited from his care.”

Anderson Spickard Jr., M.D., who was a classmate of Dr. Gass’s in medical school, said he and Dr. Gass were paired as anatomy partners the first day of medical school. “He couldn’t write in cursive, but could print faster than any of us. We used his notes to study for exams,” he said.

“He was extremely bright. He could listen to obscure lectures that many of us couldn’t even understand, and interpret them for the rest of us. He was a quiet man, but was always thinking about something extraordinary.”

Dr. Gass is survived by his wife of 54 years, Margy Ann, and children, John Donald Gass of Danville, Calif., Carlton Simpson Gass, M.D., of Miami, Dean Simpson Gass of Charlotte, N.C., and Media Lee Yawn, of Nashville.