Claude Organ

Global Surgeon

Tom Reeve, MB, FRACS, FACS(Hon)

When I first met Dr Claude Organ at a Pan Pacific Surgical meeting in Honolulu, Hawaii, our interests and discussion centered on primary hyperparathyroidism. I did not expect this larger-than-life man to become such a good, but not unquestioning friend.

Serendipity played a part in subsequent events and led to Dr Organ being involved in and having a significant effect in the Australian region of the Antipodes and the Equator.

A few months after I met Dr Organ, I received a phone call from Dr Barry Edwards, a surgeon in Hobart, Tasmania, who was seeking a visitor outside the standard mold. He gave me a tall order. He required 1 dynamic person who could inspire residents and interact easily with surgical staff for a week and follow this assignment with a speaking engagement at the 1981 Annual Scientific Congress of The Royal Australasian College of Surgeons in Hobart.

I suggested that he invite Dr Organ. He accepted the suggestion and Dr and Mrs Betty Organ came to Hobart. The following several weeks began a long love affair between Claude and Betty Organ and Tasmanian surgeons and other health professionals and their families.

In future years, when visiting with the Organs I needed to be prepared with information about the progress of their Tasmanian friends as well as those more immediately around me. Claude always seemed to see surgery as a great catalyst in promoting friendships and fostering goodwill.

At all times, Dr Organ was on the “qui vive” (on guard) for quality innovation and research leads. In speaking with Dr Edwards about Claude, he commented “He very quickly identified some very special aspects of Tasmanian surgery and was probably the mover and shaker behind a number of projects, for example, familial breast cancer and multiple endocrine neoplasia work which was started by the late professor Joe Shepherd.” Claude Organ had a profound interest in advancing these highly significant projects, and assisted by promoting an opportunity for the head nurse of the Familial Breast Cancer Project to have a working visit to the highly regarded Genetics Unit at Creighton University in Omaha, Neb. Dr Organ was working in the Department of Surgery there at the time. He was a supportive facilitator to those with ideas and a work ethic.

After his Tasmanian visit, Dr Organ traveled to Sydney where he was hosted throughout the University of Sydney teaching hospitals by many of my colleagues. He returned several times over the ensuing years and his visits were keenly anticipated and appreciated. The residents, who ferried him from place to place, greatly valued their personal time with him and were receptive to his enthusiasm and encouragement.

With senior colleagues, he enjoyed talking about surgical science, training, social, political, and ethical matters. No discussions pleased him more than those with Emeritus Professor Miles Little, eminent surgeon, now Professor of Ethics and Law at the University of Sydney, who said, “Claude was an extraordinary man who gave himself and his enthusiasm to many people and institutions in Australia. He enjoyed traveling and he valued his associations with Australia.”

A number of colleagues recall that Dr Organ could retain his “cool” under pressure and seemed to be completely at home in difficult situations even when confronted with challenges deliberately designed to unsettle him. Dr Little recalls such a time at Westmead Hospital where Dr Organ presented a paper on adrenal cancer and was then confronted by a registrar who presented 4 cases of massive adrenal tumor, 3 of whom completely defied Claude’s prognostic rules. Claude’s response made much of the incomprehensibility of Australian Rules football, and its inability to transport across national boundaries. Australians demonstrated irrationality by enjoying that weird game, he claimed and they were equally irra-

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tional to survive under the circumstances outlined.

On introduction to Singapore, Dr Organ became a close and valued friend of Professor Raj Nambiar, who was impressed with Dr Organ’s kindness and humanity and said that “he had a great fascination for the minority, disadvantaged, and underprivileged people and was a dignified opponent of racial prejudices and injustice.”

Dr and Mrs Organ were welcome in all our homes and they reciprocated in the most hospitable manner to what must have seemed an endless flow of visitors who sought Dr Organ’s company to share his wisdom and humor and were always welcomed.

He facilitated the visits of Australians and Singaporeans as well as many others to enjoy the great American surgical meetings. He was generous at all times about local surgical training, while maintaining his strong belief in the surgical training of the United States.

As editor of Archives of Surgery, he indulged his interest in matters beyond surgery and on 1 occasion commissioned (in 2000) a paper on ethonomics—the ethics of the unaffordable. Two years later, he was generous with help and advice to a young Australian on a Harkness Fellowship who was working on the concept of the citizen physician.

Dr Organ came to the Antipodes where he was little known, but on being asked how he would be recognized at the airport he told the enquirer that it would be “impossible for you to miss me.”

American surgery had a great ambassador in Dr Organ and he expanded its role in this region through his courtesy, his knowledge, and his consideration of all those with whom he came in contact, especially resident staff and the families of his hosts. In 1959, Dr Organ was elected to Honorary Fellowship of the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons a signal event for this man who had cemented so many warm friendships Down Under.

His development of the Department of Surgery in Oakland was one of his acknowledged achievements by many of our surgeons. To take it from a shell of a surgical service to a department of excellence was a major achievement. The Archives grew the same way, providing opportunity without bias from the Antipodes and Equator to North America certainly showing the way for global people to go.

For me, the privilege of knowing Dr Organ is a treasured experience, as it was to enjoy the intellectual jousting and sharing the enjoyment of family and successes and evaluating the effects and downside of failures, with a true friend.

Dr Organ—truly a global surgeon.

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Photo Remembrance of Claude H. Organ, Jr, MD

Grace S. Rozycki, MD

From left to right: Claude H. Organ, Jr, MD; Grace S. Rozycki, MD; and David V. Feliciano, MD. Photograph was taken in Atlanta, Ga, in 2003 when Dr Organ, mentor extraordinaire, invited me and Dr Feliciano to dinner.