

IN MEMORIAM

William L. Ashburn, MD, 1933–2004

William L. Ashburn, MD, professor emeritus of radiology at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD) School of Medicine, was a formidable figure on the nuclear medicine landscape during his multifaceted career, which spanned almost 40 years. He died on April 18, 2004.

Bill was born in Staten Island, NY, and grew up in Maryland. He graduated from Western Maryland College (now McDaniel College) and received his medical degree from the University of Maryland in 1959. He started in nuclear medicine after his radiology residency training at the National Institutes of Health (NIH), where he stayed to become chief of the radioisotope section in 1966. He worked with Giovanni DiChiro, MD, an extraordinary neuroradiologist and chief of neuroimaging at NIH, who inspired Bill's fascination with the emerging field of nuclear medicine. After completing service at NIH in 1968, Bill was recruited to UCSD to head the nuclear medicine division in the newly formed radiology department, chaired by Elliot Lasser, MD.

As a new resident in radiology (the first class of radiology residents at UCSD), I had the good fortune of being one of the first to rotate through Bill's nuclear medicine service in September 1968. He was amazing in his capacity as the sole expert in nuclear medicine at the university hospital. It is no wonder that when he suggested that I spend a whole year doing just nuclear medicine with him, I accepted. At about the same time, Bill recruited Sam Halpern to join him on the faculty in nuclear medicine. Sam's interests in radiopharmaceutical development were a perfect complement to Bill's focus on instrumentation. Sam is now semiretired after a brilliant career in nuclear medicine at UCSD. Bill also recruited Heinrich Schelbert, MD, back to UCSD as an assistant research cardiologist in 1973. Heinz has been a key figure in nuclear medicine at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) and is now editor-in-chief of *The Journal of Nuclear Medicine*. Andrew (Tip) Taylor, MD, was another of Bill's early recruits into nuclear medicine. Tip has become one of the world's foremost authorities in renal nuclear medicine and a career-long NIH investigator. In 1981, Rod Pettigrew, MD, PhD, started his nuclear medicine residency at UCSD. Rod is now director of the National Institute of Biomedical Imaging and Bioengineering at NIH. Many more residents, far too numerous to name individually here, were trained by Bill and went on to distinguished careers in nuclear medicine.

Perhaps Bill's most important recruitment success was his own daughter, Leigh Joas, who worked as the lead technologist in nuclear medicine (currently a radiology supervisor) at the Scripps Green Hospital in La Jolla, CA. Leigh recalls as a little girl "going to the hospital with him

when he was on call, seeing what he did, and that it was fascinating! And, he used to keep me updated with new developments as they happened." Leigh graduated from UCLA with a major in psychology, entered the first class at UCSD in the nuclear medicine technology training program, and later earned her masters in business administration.



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Bill was particularly fascinated by the physics/instrumentation side of nuclear medicine. He was enthusiastic about innovations and inventions that could improve the imaging of radionuclide emissions. At heart, he was an inventor and gadgeteer par excellence. He was known nationally for his work in cardiac function imaging and analysis. Very early on, he understood the potential of computers for analysis of nuclear imaging data and pioneered applications in cardiac function studies. Ultimately, Bill acted on the many instrumentation ideas that filled his head. When he retired from UCSD in 1994, he devoted himself full time to a career as medical director of Digirad, a company that he helped to found to develop solid-state technology for medical imaging. Today Digirad is a successful, multimillion dollar company with 300 employees and specializes in cardiac imaging equipment for hospitals, imaging centers, and physician offices.

Many of us in nuclear medicine were fortunate to experience another side of Bill: his love of music. He played the saxophone in several bands over the years, including Biorhythm (which specialized in big band music) and Finest City Jazz Band (a regular feature at the Del Mar Fair). In addition, he played at various nuclear medicine functions, including SNM Western Regional meetings and impromptu evening music sessions at several professional meetings.

Bill died at home at the age of 71, after a long bout with prostate cancer. He was blessed with a wonderful family. His wife of 43 years, Sally; his son, the Reverend Don Ashburn, of Oakland, CA; his daughters Dana Krehmke of Del Mar, CA, and Leigh Joas of Carmel Valley, CA; three grandchildren, Griffin and Madeleine Ashburn and Allison Joas; and his mother, Serena, of Escondido, CA, survive him.

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