



Jerold E. Phelps, M.D.

1924-2006

Dr. Jerold Phelps died quietly at his home in Garberville on Christmas Day 2006, surrounded by his wife, Betty, children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. For over 50 years, Dr. Phelps had been a highly respected physician and prominent member of the Southern Humboldt County Community. Among his many achievements and contributions were his years on the Board of the College of the Redwoods, his service to the Humboldt-Del Norte County Medical Society and his passionate devotion to the California Bamboo Society. He helped build the existing hospital in Garberville and was honored by having the hospital renamed the Jerold Phelps Community Hospital in 1997.

Jerold Edgar Phelps was born in Wheatland, Wyoming on March 15, 1924, the second youngest of six children. When still a young child, his family relocated to Fontana, in Southern California and Jerold has stayed in California ever since. He was in college in Santa Maria when WWII began, and at that point joined the Navy, who sent him through medical school in Galveston, Texas. It was in Texas that he met a local beauty queen, Bettie Todd, and they were soon married. Jerry finished his Navy service in San Juan, Puerto Rico, then finished his surgery training in New York.

It was in 1955 when Jerry returned to California and answered an ad for a general surgeon in a booming logging town in Northern California. He came to work in Garberville with Dr. Leland Lowen as the town's second doctor-surgeon. Not long afterward, Dr. Lowen left and Jerry found Dr. Jack Pearson; these two surgeons enjoyed decades of close professional association and even closer friendship. Together, Jerry and Jack served the surgical and medical needs of Southern Humboldt Co. Jerry Phelps never really did retire, although he did cut back his practice in later years, still seeing old friends and patients until a few months before his death.

The 2001-2002 Physician Membership Resource Directory was very deservedly dedicated to Jerry. The dedication article is posted on-line on the Medical Society's website: in the Historical Section. Nomination for the CMA Plessner Award came up several times, however, part of the criteria for the award is that the nominees cannot be retired status..... although Jerry never really "retired".....he tried several times and sought the status on paper, which made him ineligible for nomination. The following quotes were pulled from the Dedication article from 1997:

Comments from Bill Hunter's.....

"Medical times changed during Jerry's sojourn in southern Humboldt county, as did the culture and the economy. Throughout the changes he remained a perfect gentleman and cared for the needs of all the region's citizens. He was responsible for the real world training of a number of young doctors who came to town and was always willing to get up at night an help put in a

dislocated shoulder, sew a finger back on, or help with a difficult birth.

Comments from Mark Phelps.....

As I look at rural medicine today, and reflect on what a commitment my father made to this community back in 1955, I realize rare that combination of effort and ability has become. Even back then, when Dad and Jack recruited the occasional third partner, he would never be a physician with the experience and skill to do the emergency surgery, difficult emergency room cases or the anesthesia or OB needed to keep this busy hospital going. Even those days, theoretically, when Dad could relax, the telephone inevitably would ring and there would be an emergency appendectomy or amputation or GI bleed to deal with, as transferring to Eureka was simply not done for those cases. I am sure that Dad realized what a uniquely stressful commitment he had undertaken, but never in all of the years I was growing up did I hear one complaint or harsh word when the phone would ring again, just after or even during dinner, an off he would go once again to perhaps return before we went to bed or perhaps not.

Certainly all of my surgical skills, often limited to minor abdominal procedures or Cæsarian sections, I truly learned with my father "assisting". Even the basics of wound closure, I realized had been poorly conveyed to me in residency, but a careful and meticulous surgeon with decades of experience could gently show me by example and instruction on the most "tissue friendly" method in which to handle wounds. A lot of Dad's surgical training and philosophy were aimed toward plastic surgery and that idea was always in the background of his care and treatment of human tissue. Furthermore, the whole open minded and calm approach to the practice of medicine and the treatment of illness quickly became a cornerstone of my continuing to learn and develop as a doctor and continues to this day. If indeed, learning on the job is inevitable what occurs in any long term career I could have never hoped for a better, more superior teacher to have learned under than my father. His opinion, in staff meetings and in the clinic, is still as valued and powerful today as it has ever been. And I take tremendous pride in even attempting to follow in his very large footsteps.

Dr. Phelps is survived by his wife, Bettie, his sister Dee, his children Kim, Mark, Laurie, Todd and Kelly and their spouses and numerous grandchildren, great-grandchildren, nieces, nephews and cousins. He will be sorely missed by all.

Memorial contributions may be made to the Southern Humboldt Community Hospital Foundation, Attn. Debbie Scaife, 733 Cedar Street, Garberville, CA 95542.

A memorial service is being coordinated for the middle of March and notices will be sent out once the date, time and location have been set.