Obituary

JAMES W. STEPHENS
(1920–1966)

Those of us who had the good fortune to know James W. Stephens, late Professor of Neurology at the University of Colorado School of Medicine, will remember him for many things, but foremost among them were his wit, humanity and individuality. In an age when conformity is commonplace, he insisted on the right of a man to be unique. His great and genuine regard for the thought and opinions of his colleagues, from medical students to professors, created an intellectual climate about him which encouraged the freest exchange of ideas. James Stephens stood out in most groups, not just because of his scientific ability, but because of warmth, humor and clarity of speech and thought.

Born in Hereford, England, he received his medical training at Guy’s Hospital and the University of London, from which he graduated in 1942. After a brief internship, he entered the Royal Army Medical Corps and served in North Africa and Italy, where he was wounded. Between 1947 and 1951, Dr. Stephens trained in Neurology at both Guy’s Hospital and the National Hospital, Queen Square. As did so many of his colleagues, he then emigrated to Canada where he entered private practice for 2 years. In 1953, he was appointed Assistant Professor of Neurology at the University of Colorado and rose to become Professor and Chairman of the Division of Neurology in 1962.

Dr. Stephens served from 1957 to 1961 on the Neurological Research Training Grant Committee of the United States Public Health Service. He held many consultant appointments and was elected to membership in the American Neurological Association in 1961. At the time of his death he was a member of the Committee responsible for organizing the Greenbrier Conference on Neurological Education.

In November 1965, James Stephens went to the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda to begin to learn the technique of electron microscopy so as to apply them to the study of muscle diseases. He did this at an age when most men would have been content with their professional accomplishments, because he himself was never content with the past. His drive was always toward the future and towards measuring his own powers by extending them to the fullest. When it became apparent a few months later that he had a fatal illness, he used his talents, particularly his humor, to support those about him. On the day of his death he told his physician that if by some chance he were cured, he would report the case but that he did not enjoy gathering the data.

James Stephens leaves no great body of scientific work behind him. He was known professionally as a superb clinical neurologist and an outstanding teacher. This reputation was becoming more widespread as increasing numbers of his colleagues asked him to stop at their institutions for periods as visiting professor. What he does leave behind is the indelible imprint on his associates and trainees of his great desire for excellence and for intellectual honesty. He was a living example of the fact that medicine is still an art and not just a science. James Stephens will be remembered as most of us would wish to be remembered — with a smile, and with the great regret that such vitality was taken from us at so early an age.

Stuart Schneck