

RCH cardiologist led with his heart

Dr. Tom Godwin, who passed away last month, was a fervent advocate for patients, and was known for his kindness to all whose path he crossed

Dr. Tom Godwin never did things in half-measure. Not at home where he helped raise four sons with his wife of 52 years, Elaine. Not in his choice of dog, a succession of 200-pound English mastiffs.

Not at his 120-acre farm in Surrey where he tended up to 110 head of cattle.

Not at work, where he established the cardiac program and Royal Columbian Hospital (RCH) and his innovation of the cardiac catheterization lab and open-heart surgery programs helped lead the New Westminster hospital to become one of the top care centers for heart patients in the country.

Godwin, who passed away in April, was driven by an undeniable passion to help people, and to do the right thing, says his son David.

“He loved what he did. He had an unbelievable work ethic.”

That was apparent as soon as he was hired as the only cardiologist at RCH in 1968, seven years after graduating from medical school at the University of Toronto. In his first 18 months on the job, he took one day off.

“He gave his life to the hospital,” says David. “His attitude was he’s the only cardiologist, he’s it.”

“There is absolutely no doubt that what you saw was what you got with Tom,” says James Fair, the former president and CEO of RCH. “He was sincere, genuine and honest as the day is long.”

So much so that as his medical career took root, he started taking copious notes about anything and everything he saw and experienced during his rounds at the hospital. Sometimes they were anecdotes. Some were observations. Some were strident opinions about the level of care offered patients, gaps in the medical system, social issues. He figured



When Dr. Tom Godwin was hired at Royal Columbian Hospital in 1968, he was the only cardiologist on staff. Today the cardiology department has grown to include a dozen doctors.

they’d someday make good fodder for a book, *A Doctor’s Notes*, which he eventually did publish in 2009.

He advocated for his patients, including those with a terminal prognosis. The latter may have come from his experiences with his own mother, who suffered from dementia in her final years.

“That had a big part in it,” says David. “He knew she didn’t want to be living the way she was living and there was nothing he could do for her. He thought it was awful.”

Godwin’s caring attitude extended beyond his patients, to his colleagues in the doctors’

lounge, the nurses, and the cleaning staff who mopped the floors. He even took care in writing out prescriptions and instructions in neat, legible script so they could be easily read by pharmacists.

Godwin “was always highly respected by his colleagues and idolized by his patients and staff,” says Fair.

“He didn’t think he was better than anyone else,” says David. “He drove the oldest car in the doctor’s parking lot and he was quite proud of that.”

In fact most of Godwin’s family was oblivious to his pioneering medical accomplishments at RCH until after he was forced into retirement by illness in 1996.

“He was so modest about all that stuff,” says David.

And while Godwin no longer practiced medicine, he kept abreast of developments in cardiology by reading medical journals.

“He liked to keep up with what was going on,” says David. “He sort of thought he could do more, there was more he could contribute.”

But with the cardiology department at RCH now grown to 12 doctors and rated amongst the top in the country, Godwin had achieved plenty.

“It’s a real legacy of things that he’s done and what he accomplished,” says David.

Did you know?

- RCH’s Cardiac Centre is among the best in Canada. Show them your support by purchasing a heart tile for the Cardiac Wall of Gratitude. Visit rchcares.com for more information.



Dr. Godwin’s wife, Elaine, displays a heart tile at RCH in honour of her husband. “Tom advocated for the good health of his patients and the hospital,” she says.