

An Unforgettable Character, Indeed

By Clyde W. Jones, M.D., F.A.C.A.

When I began my residency training in Anesthesiology at the Naval Hospital, San Diego, in 1963, John A. Dekrey, M.D., was a member of the teaching staff. To say that he was a maverick, unconventional, flamboyant, audacious and unique would be to understate his impact. He may, at times, have pushed the envelope, but the thrust of his teaching and practice was to show the wide utility of regional anesthesia in anesthetic practice and to instill confidence in performing these techniques.

He was a consummate crusader for conduction anesthesia and operated with missionary zeal. Cranial nerve blocks, neuroaxial blocks at all levels, cervical, thoracic, lumbar and caudal, peripheral blocks of all varieties were all arrows in his quiver. Under his tutelage facial surgery, thyroid surgery, breast and shoulder procedures, high and low abdominal surgery, lumbar discectomies, perineal and extremity procedures were all accomplished with regional techniques. This was at a time when few centers taught such a wide application of conduction anesthesia, causing Naval Hospital, San Diego, to become known as a bastion for such practices.

Known for his picturesque speech and witticisms, John Dekrey has had as many sayings attributed to him as the legendary Yogi Berra. He established a block clinic where the orthopedists sent patients with fractures for nerve blocks. We provided these blocks, kept the patients for a short time until stable, and returned them for reduction, casting and discharge. Unusual at that time! Many reservists who came to San Diego thought this to be unsafe. Dr. Dekrey refuted these arguments with the fact that we did hundreds of these without significant complications, except for "a few shivers" as John was wont to say. We treated patients in this manner from infants to nonagenarians over the years. Some impatient surgeons would grumble from time to time, but all hands recognized Dr. Dekrey's unexcelled expertise, intrepidity and confidence in his techniques. He was the perennial winner of the Interns' Teaching Award and his fame spread as our residents and staff transferred from San Diego to other duty stations and to civilian life. He was invited to educational programs to spread his gospel and was always dramatic, instructive and entertaining.

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At San Diego we were blessed with many induction rooms in the Surgical Suite that allowed us to get our procedures started early enough to offset the latency period required for some regional procedures.

Beside his expertise in conduction anesthesia, he was an expert in open drop ether, mask inductions with slow agents like ether and methoxyflurane, blind nasal intubations, and intubation of patients in unusual positions. We learned from him, in the process, sound airway management and a familiarity with the Guedel Stages of Anesthesia. I have called upon this fundamental knowledge repeatedly in my career. In retrospect, it is such unusual teachers as John Dekrey that bring us memories of excitement and mirth, and an everlasting appreciation for the pivotal part they played in our development.

He was a mixer of local anesthetics (for example, lidocaine and tetracaine–dubbed “Supercaine”) and taught us that maximum doses stated in drug inserts can be modified with proper care and staging.

Several years ago some of his disciples, including this author, recommended him for the Distinguished Service Award of the American Society of Regional Anesthesia. This was awarded to Dr. Dekrey at its Annual Meeting in San Diego in March 1996. Present were several of his former students, colleagues and friends and a previous Commanding Officer.

Dr. Dekrey remained at the Naval Hospital, San Diego, and became the Chief of Anesthesiology in 1979. After retirement from active duty he remained on the teaching staff for several years as a civilian. He is now a resident of Minnesota.

Dr. Dekrey is also an accomplished apiarist and maintained several hives in a remote site of the hospital compound. Many of us were recipients of delicious honey and beeswax candles harvested and fabricated from his hives. He also made available personal tours for us and our children to appreciate the complexity of the society of honeybees. Shakespeare dubbed them “creatures that, by a rule in nature, teach the act of order to a peopled kingdom” (*Henry V*, Act I, Scene II.) Indubitably! Thank you, John.