

# Alan Davies Sessler, MD – 1932 - 2020

Douglas R. Bacon, MD, MA, FASA

**On March 18, 2020, Alan Davies Sessler, MD, died peacefully in his sleep.** His was a long and fruitful life, spent in the service of others. The tapestry of his life was woven through the many roles he embraced. Alan was a dear friend, a gentle mentor, an accomplished administrator, innovative educator and, distilled to its essence, a beloved leader.

Dr. Sessler was born in the height of the Great Depression on April 4, 1932 in the Jamaica Plain neighborhood of Boston, Massachusetts. His father, Albert, was a dentist, and his mother, Mildred, a stay-at-home mother. He matriculated at Boston Latin, which is the oldest public school in the United States. Academics were rigorous and taught Alan the value of merit because success at the school came to those who earned it in the classroom. Social standing had no influence.

College years were spent in Hanover, New Hampshire, at Dartmouth College where he earned his A.B. degree and began a lifelong commitment to the university. After his undergraduate studies were complete, Dr. Sessler attended Boston University, earning his medical degree in 1957. Internship and residency followed at Mary Hitchcock Memorial Hospital in Hanover. It was during his internship that he met and married the love of his life, Martha Anne Smith. They were married July 4, 1959, in La Marque, Texas. Their union would last over 60 years. Three children were born to Alan and Martha – Steven (Mary), Karen and James. Three grandchildren, of which Alan took particular delight, were born to Steven and Mary; Megan and Lauren Sessler and Katlin (Clement) Sessler Towner, who also bore the only great-grandchild, a great-grandson, Oliver Towner.

Shortly after his marriage, in August 1959, the U.S. Navy activated Dr. Sessler. Initially he was assigned to the Great Lakes Naval Hospital, but in November 1960 he was reassigned as the medical officer on the USS Des Moines, a heavy cruiser. On the ship's last tour prior to decommissioning in July 1961, Alan spent nine months on board in the Mediterranean.

Later that year, Alan arrived at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, to complete a fellowship in anesthesiology. In 1962, he became a consultant and would spend the next 33 years nurturing and leading the specialty of anesthesiology. In the late 1960s, Dr. Sessler was among the leaders in developing intensive care medicine, forming some of the first such units in the country. As the residency program director, he innovated the learning process by holding some of the early journal clubs in his living room, thus bringing together the faculty and the residents in an informal setting. He was able to “grow” the

program by increasing the number of trainees and developing curricula that ensured the learners developed into mature, accomplished physicians.

In 1977, Dr. Sessler was appointed chair of the department – the youngest person to hold the position at the Mayo Clinic. For the next 11 years, he oversaw the development of the department into a major academic force in the specialty. Alan became a director of the American Board of Anesthesiology, eventually attaining the positions of Secretary/Treasurer and President. For a number of years, he was the ASA's Vice President for Scientific Affairs. He was honored as a fellow of the Royal College of Anaesthetists of the United Kingdom and an honorary fellow of the Faculty of Anaesthetists of the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland. In 1988, he was appointed Dean of the Mayo School of Graduate Medical Education, a post he held until his retirement in 1995.



Dr. Sessler (right), while President of FAER, accepted a Research Starter Grant from George Griffith, Group Product Director of Janssen Pharmaceutical.

Even in retirement, Alan Sessler did not stop mentoring the profession. A charter member of the Foundation for Anesthesia Education and Research (FAER), he became the president and led the Foundation's growth. He worked tirelessly to ensure the financial growth of the organization in the belief that young anesthesiologists needed to be mentored in the research careers and needed specific grant support. Alan also labored to include

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Dr. Sessler reviewed a presentation by FAER Medical Student Anesthesia Research Fellowship participants Victoria Saites, BS, and Janelle Tryjankowski, MS, at ANESTHESIOLOGY 2011.

young educators in the mentored grant process to ensure that the specialty developed individuals capable of creating new and vibrant ways of teaching anesthesiology to the next generation of physicians.

Jim Eisenach, current FAER President, shared with the FAER board his appreciation for Alan's contributions:

*I first met Alan in 1982 when he was Chair of Anesthesiology at Mayo Clinic and I was interviewing for residency. I entered residency with a certainty that I would settle in a moderate-sized Midwest town and enjoy a life in private practice. I left with a re-found passion for research and education, an academic fellowship in North Carolina, and an NIH application that was eventually funded. Alan transformed many lives as he did mine, serving as both a mentor and a sponsor. For me, doors opened at the ABA, Anesthesiology, the AUA, and FAER in large part due to Alan's sponsorship. I started as FAER's President and CEO in 2016 just as the FAER offices moved from Rochester, Minnesota, to ASA headquarters in Schaumburg, Illinois. One of the new Schaumburg FAER staff noted after her first ASA annual meeting with Alan in attendance that he was a "rock star" in the sense that everyone wanted to shake his hand, spend a few minutes with him, and leave with a smile or a hug. It is that smile and wisdom behind it that come to mind when I think of Alan.*

The tapestry of the life of Alan Davies Sessler, MD, is a rich cloth woven of many fine threads. His love of excellence, his pursuit of knowledge and new, exciting ways to impart it to others, and his gentle mentoring are a great legacy. He is survived by his wife, his sons and daughter, his granddaughters and his great grandson. Alan is also survived by his professional family, those he taught over the years, his colleagues and his mentees. To be a small part of Alan's tapestry is an honor – to create a similar legacy is a challenge.



Dr. Sessler hard at work in the FAER office with Denham S. Ward, MD.