

Remembrances of Alan D. Sessler, MD

Mark A. Warner, MD
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On Friday, June 29, 1979, at 4 p.m., my wife, Mary Ellen, and I joined four PGY-1 resident colleagues in the Mayo Clinic Department of Anesthesiology's library in Rochester, Minnesota. Dr. Sessler introduced us to each other and to the department, telling us that the only thing he asked of us was to use our talents to the best of our ability. I was so impressed with him that I told Mary Ellen on the ride home that evening that I wanted to be like him someday.

Little did I know how much of an impression he made on everyone in that room: four of us remained at Mayo Clinic our entire careers and, to the best of our ability, tried to please Dr. Sessler by doing as well as we could. He quietly and slyly (we called him "the silver-haired fox") inspired and cajoled us into taking on roles and initiatives that we otherwise would likely not have done. None of us wished to ever disappoint him. So many others in anesthesiology have subsequently felt the same way.



Alan D. Sessler, MD

Dr. Sessler cherished his institutions: Boston Latin High School, Dartmouth College, the Navy, Mayo Clinic, and our specialty. His understated but tenacious push to make all of these better through expansion of anesthesiology practice, increased education, and support for career development through his roles with the ASA, ABA, FAER, APSF, the Academy of Anesthesiologists, and the WLM made him a potent and important force. Dr. Sessler was a founding member and president of FAER, a founding member of APSF, president of the ABA, member of the ACGME's Residency Review Committee, vice president of the ASA, and an ASA Distinguished Service Awardee.



Alan with his wife, Martha S. Sessler, MD, an anesthesiologist and Alan's life-long love.

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Within Mayo Clinic, Dr. Sessler was the Department of Anesthesiology's youngest chair. He founded our institution's intensive care units and was a profound supporter of developing pain medicine as a subspecialty of anesthesiology. As a department chair, he had a unique ability to quietly cajole and assuage brilliant colleagues (and sometimes their egos) to work collaboratively within and beyond our specialty.

Dr. Sessler took on many leadership roles within Mayo Clinic. He was successful in each role but always with an eye toward understanding how his roles could help him promote our department and the specialty. In his two biggest roles, he served as Dean of the Mayo Clinic School for Graduate Medical Education and as a member of our Board of Governors.

Dr. Sessler wasn't a big coffee drinker, but so often he would ask many of us, "Let's sit and have a cup of coffee together." He was a great mentor, but more importantly, he was an incredible sponsor. He taught many of us how to project opportunities for the career development of others and how to advocate, often behind the scenes (i.e., "let's go for a walk"), for others. A number of outstanding people can be good mentors; only a few can be remarkable sponsors. He did this for so many people and he did it so quietly. He had no prejudices; all he wanted was for people to use their innate talents to succeed and to promote the success of the institutions and specialty he loved so much.

For my entire career, Dr. Sessler would visit with me at least weekly. Every single time, he wanted to provide me with advice on how to improve the department, Mayo Clinic, ASA, our foundations, the Academy, or the ABA. He was relentless in his belief that improving education in the specialty was the way to advance each of these. I last saw him the week before he passed away; he dropped by my office to spend 30 minutes



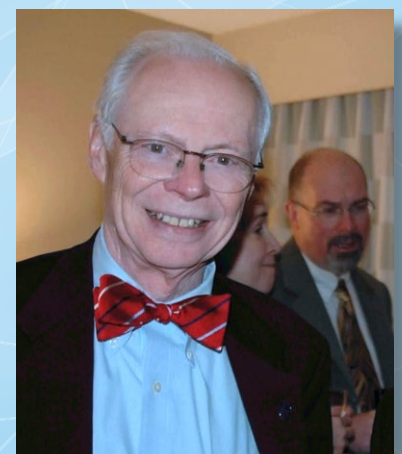
2006 photo of Alan and the three Mayo Clinic Department of Anesthesiology chairs who followed him (clockwise from upper left): Brady J. Narr, MD, Mark A. Warner, MD, Alan D. Sessler, MD, and Duane K. Rorie, MD, PhD.

telling me how we should increase opportunities for women in clinical research. I reciprocated by telling him that Mary Ellen had just been promoted to Professor of Anesthesiology and that we anticipated at least one more woman joining her in the next month. He was so proud to hear this. Nothing gave him more satisfaction or made him prouder than to see "his" mentees and "his" department succeed.

Mary Ellen and I were profoundly influenced by Dr. Sessler. He made us better people, physicians, and professionals. He did the same for all of us. So many of us at our institution and in our specialty will miss him dearly.



Alan with Dr. Steven Rose, MD, from the 2010 ASA annual meeting. Steve was one of Alan's favorite protégés; he currently is the Dean of the Mayo Clinic School of Graduate Medical Education, a position that Alan previously held.



Alan at a 2005 Mayo Clinic Department of Anesthesiology Alumni Reception during the ASA Annual Meeting. Over his left shoulder is Marc A. Huntoon, MD, currently a professor at Virginia Commonwealth University.