

Dr Wally Thomas 1921–2013



Wally Thomas passed away on 15 January at the age of 92. A graduate of Dalhousie University (class of 1945) and a former surgeon-lieutenant in the Canadian Navy, Wally led the Division of Laboratory Hematology at Vancouver General Hospital (VGH) and the University of British Columbia from 1956 until his retirement in 1983. He then embraced his other interests, growing and hybridizing orchids and building sailboats, always accompanied by his Newfoundland dog. In 1999 he was chairman of the 16th World Orchid Conference held in Vancouver.

Wally unexpectedly became head of hematology shortly after his arrival in Vancouver, and over the next 25 years he was able to realize the vision he held for this new medical discipline. In doing so, he became the mentor of several generations of hematologists in BC. There was no consulting service at VGH when he arrived, so in the early days he not only managed the lab, but also made regular weekly rounds on the medical wards with his colleagues. The specialty of hematology was in its infancy in the 1950s, but having trained at Hammersmith Hospital in London, England, under Sir John Dacie, Wally was well prepared to establish the routine hema-

tology lab and the blood bank. Coagulation was an interest of his, and he introduced the basic tests for the diagnosis of hemophilia. In 1955 he recognized a case different from classical hemophilia (FVIII deficiency), and the patient was subsequently identified at Oxford to have Christmas disease (FIX deficiency).

By the early 1970s Wally had assembled the core group for a complex hematology program at VGH. This included a routine and special hematology diagnostic service, the blood transfusion service, and the immunology lab, which supported the new renal transplantation program. He then turned his interests to cellular immunology and its application to leukemia therapy.

Wally was an inclusive person who wanted to encourage collaboration and fellowship among hematologists in the Vancouver area. The weekly rounds he established were well attended for many years by those practising in the Lower Mainland.

As a friend of E. Donall Thomas, the Nobel laureate, Wally was invited to visit the original bone marrow transplant facility at the Hutchinson Centre in Seattle, and it was there that he saw the prototype of the early cell separator. Funds were raised, and soon the equipment was purchased and the single donor platelet and therapeutic apheresis unit was opened on East 6 in the Centennial Pavilion of VGH.

Over the years many of us were entertained in Wally's office, surrounded by myriad old glass blood transfusion bottles and culture flasks. This was the germinal centre for the orchid business that was to flourish after his retirement.

Those of us who knew him well always appreciated the respect he showed to us and to our trainees. On many occasions he expressed wonderment at the amazing development

of his chosen specialty in Vancouver and the rest of BC.

Wally is survived by his wife of 58 years, Dr Shirley Baker-Thomas, four children, and seven grandchildren. We fondly remember Wally as a fine leader and a dear friend.

—Jorge Denegri, MD

—George Gray, MD

—Jerry Growe, MD

—Shelly Naiman, MD

—Ted Reeve, MD

Dr Ayalew Allan Kassa 1956–2013



On the morning of 22 March 2013 Al succumbed to a non-resuscitable cardiac event. He was 56.

As word spread, an eerie silence descended on the Fort Nelson General Hospital and surrounding communities. The world had lost an Ethiopian prince; Fort Nelson and First Nations had lost a medical missionary and saint; Betty and Leah Asher had lost a soul mate and father; and we had lost a brother.

Al was born in a mud hut in Boroumeda, Ethiopia. It did not take long to recognize that he had amazing potential in all aspects, especially intellectually. He received a scholarship to complete his high school education at the esteemed Wingate High School. At age 17, he escaped the

communist uprising to continue his scholarship education in England. He earned his medical degree from the University of Birmingham, graduating as a gold medalist, and rounded out his credentials with a residency in obstetrics and anesthesia.

In August 1991 he relocated to Fort Nelson. He intended the move to be a stepping stone, but got stuck in the mud and hoarfrost. For the next 5 years he practised at the Fort Nelson Medical Clinic with Dr Anthony Kenyon. Shortly after arrival he met and was magnetized to Betty Asher, the director of nursing at the local hospital. Their relationship blossomed, and they became inseparable soul mates. He accepted Leah as his own daughter, and mentored and counseled her to independence as a First Nations teacher. Over the next 2 decades Al and Betty would provide a significant contribution to the community of Fort Nelson. Their regular sanity breaks, during which they would leave town for CME or a vacation, were dreaded, as this meant that the bustling case room and operating theatre would be put on hold without Al's expertise. As a consequence, maternity patients would spend several weeks in Fort St. John or Dawson Creek motels and medevac numbers would skyrocket.

Five years later Al started a lifelong partnership with Dr Marius Mostert, which was an ironic affiliation—a black Ethiopian and a white South African! They opened the Airport Way Medical Clinic, and a lifelong, harmonious friendship flourished. We enjoyed regular updates and vignettes of their frontier medical adventures—multiple trauma from auto, aviation, and industrial accidents, as well as bear attacks and obstetrical nightmares. On one occasion, they were faced with the challenge of performing emergency surgery by flashlight following a power and backup generator failure, but still achieved a positive outcome!

With time Al developed a special

bond with his First Nations patients of Fort Nelson, Fort Liard, and Prophet River. They had implicit trust in his professional skills and judgment. He was considered one of them. During his years in practice in England and Canada, he delivered approximately 10 000 babies without fetal or maternal loss, and these numbers included many First Nations births. He was invited to their christenings, potlatches, and wedding ceremonies. They addressed him reverently as “Kassa.” When the First Nations community heard of his death, they did not hesitate to prepare a celebratory feast in his honor. Al, along with Betty and Leah, left an indelible imprint on First Nations health care and education.

Al lived his life in afterburner mode. His athletic endeavors included cricket, boxing, squash, and windsurfing. He had a passion verging on addiction for a sadistic Scottish pastime that involves using clubs to force a little white creature to dive into a hole not once, but eighteen times. It was common knowledge that if Al was needed for an emergency and did not respond to his pager, all it took was an RCMP constable dispatched to the local fairway to bring him back to reality. He was fiercely competitive. On one occasion he was winning a small fortune when his companions suggested that he should walk rather than share the luxury of the cart. His rebuttal was a dagger to the heart: “Don't get sick!” It worked.

We will never forget his patented, emphatic facial expression—the thyroid storm/Sambo saucer stare. It signified that his mind was in hyperdrive. All it took to decipher his emotional state was to cue in on his Anglo-Ethiopian drawl and his eyes—happy, sad, confused, or agitated, but never angry.

His memorial service in Fort Nelson was testimony to the amazing impact that Al had on the town and First Nations community over the lifetime of his practice. The community

hall was filled to capacity and the Internet feed was viewed in Canada, US, Europe, and Africa. During the service we learned that Al was a giver and not a taker. With his remarkable intellect and curiosity he created a standard of care that is a tribute to rural medicine. We learned that he did not hesitate to purchase an ultrasound machine when the provincial government would not provide funding for one, and then recruited healthy guinea pigs, including the mayor, to expand his knowledge base.

In addition, he created a foundation committed to village irrigation, school construction, and enhanced medical care in his beloved Ethiopia. He was also committed to funding university tuition for his 11 nieces and nephews. Those who wish to support Al's philanthropic work can make contributions to Dr Kassa's Memorial Trust at local banks.

A bright star has been extinguished before its time. Al arrived on the scene the year that Betty and Leah lost Jason, age 11, to a rare CNS tumor. On the day of Al's death Leah put it all into perspective. “Uncle Jack,” she said, “Al saved our lives. He's happy. He got what he wanted. He would be confused by all the fuss. He's already home in Africa.”

Family and friends will escort him to Ethiopia to see him laid to rest beside his priest father. Our lives will never be the same. The mold of the lion in winter has been broken.

—**Jack Albrecht, MD**

—**Ruth Albrecht, MD**

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