JOHN N. INSALL, MD
1930-2000

John N. Insall, considered by many to be the father of modern-day total knee replacement prostheses and techniques, died peacefully on December 30, 2000.

John Insall was born in 1930 in Bournemouth, England, by the sea. He was educated at the University of Cambridge and at London Hospital Medical School, graduating in 1956. He received his training at St. Bartholomew’s Hospital in Kent and at The Royal Free Hospital in London. He then served as a resident in general surgery and orthopaedic surgery at the Royal Victoria Hospital and at Shriners Hospital for Crippled Children in Montreal. In 1961, he was awarded a fellowship in orthopaedic surgery at The Hospital for Special Surgery in New York City.

After two years of practice in England, he returned to the United States in 1965 as an attending surgeon and director of the Knee Service at The Hospital for Special Surgery. He served as professor of orthopaedic surgery at Cornell University Medical College from 1980 to 1996. In 1991, he joined with Drs. W. Norman Scott, Michael A. Kelly, and Peter D. McCann to form the Insall Scott Kelly (ISK) Institute and its fellowship program. In 1996, he was appointed clinical professor of orthopaedic surgery at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine.

Dr. Insall was a founding member of the Knee Society in 1983 and became its president in 1987. He was instrumental in the development of the Knee Society scoring system. His colleagues recognized his many achievements by establishing the Insall Award, which honors an outstanding paper concerning clinical results and techniques at the annual open meeting of the Society.

John Insall’s contributions to orthopaedic surgery are legendary. His articles appeared in The Journal of Bone and Joint Surgery over four decades, beginning with reports on his experience with valgus tibial osteotomy for the treatment of osteoarthritis of the knee. Subsequent articles dealt with techniques for the treatment of patellar chondromalacia and malalignment as well as iliotibial band transfer for the treatment of knees with anterior cruciate ligament deficiency. His most outstanding publication is the classic book Surgery of the Knee (now in its third edition), coedited by his colleague and dear friend Dr. Norman Scott.

Dr. Insall will be most remembered for his numerous contributions to knee arthroplasty. His work with the total condylar knee prosthesis began in 1974 at The Hospital for Special Surgery, and, with Albert Burstein, he designed the Insall-Burstein knee prosthesis, first implanted in 1978. With Michael Freeman, he pioneered the philosophy of excision of the cruciate ligaments and soft-tissue releases during knee arthroplasty. Among his special talents was his ability to devise arthroplasty techniques that were forgiving yet effective, allowing countless otherwise crippled patients throughout the world to resume normal lives. His most recent design innovations involved mobile-bearing inserts and fixed bearings that allow high degrees of flexion.

Dr. Insall also developed exposure techniques (for example, the “quadriceps snip”), quadricepsplasty for the treatment of patellar instability, ligament releases for the treatment of angular deformity, and intraoperative guidelines for femoral component rotation. He was a pioneer in the two-stage revision for septic knee arthroplasty. In addition, he was responsible for the design of many instruments used intraoperatively to facilitate the accurate implantation of prosthetic components.

His long-term follow-up studies of clinical results in various populations of patients, such as those who are young, elderly, or obese and those who have diabetes, psoriasis, or poliomyelitis, are the gold standard against which all future results will be compared.

John Insall was an acknowledged master surgeon. His clinical skills were complemented by his equally strong ability to teach others by both word and example. Some sixty surgeons, many now world-renowned themselves, served as his fellows. They formed the Insall Club in his honor and meet annually to share experiences and promote research in knee arthroplasty techniques.

His lectures were classics, and he served frequently as the keynote speaker at national meetings. He was an annual fixture, for example, at Seth Greenwald’s Current Concepts Meeting in Orlando, Larry Dorr’s Master Techniques in Los Angeles, and, of course, the ISK meeting in New York City. He adopted Leo Whiteside’s technique of video presentation in lieu of slides, delivering messages that were clear, precise, and, when appropriate, entertaining.

Both in public and in private, John Insall was a kind and good person; he was a gentleman and a role model for his colleagues and his friends. An avid reader, he could converse on virtually any topic. If he disagreed with you, he would not become argumentative, but his silence spoke volumes.

He loved golf and was a student of the game. If your swing was off, he could tell you why, but he never offered advice unless asked. As one might expect, his own swing was controlled and graceful, and his short game was played with surgical precision.

His academic demands made him a world traveler. He profited from these opportunities to educate himself about the local culture, frequenting museums and historical sites. His boundless energy took him on many a long walk to experience the environs of a new city and partake of the local cuisine.

In May 1999, the orthopaedic community was shocked to learn that John had metastatic lung cancer. We were not surprised, however, at the strength and dignity that he showed over the next eighteen months. Never complaining, he remained optimistic and as active as possible.

In his last year, John returned to the seaside in Connecticut with his beloved wife, Mary V.; his daughter, Amanda; his son, John H.; his grandson, John E.; and countless friends, students, and grateful patients throughout the world.

R.D.S.