

# K. Alvin Merendino, MD

December 3, 1914 — September 10, 2011

---

It is with deep sadness we announce Dr. K. Alvin Merendino passed away Saturday, September 10, 2011. He is perhaps best known as a pioneering open-heart surgeon and led the team that performed the west coast's first cardiac operation on bypass (a pulmonary artery stenosis) in August 1956 at Harborview Medical Center.

Dr. Merendino earned his medical degree in 1940 from Yale University and a Ph.D. in Surgery from the University of Minnesota where he was a faculty member before joining the University of Washington. He came to the University of Washington in 1949 as associate professor of surgery and soon became director of the experimental surgery laboratories.

After University Hospital (now UW Medical Center) opened, he was the second surgeon-in-chief in the Department of Surgery 1964-1972, succeeding Dr. Henry Harkins. During his tenure as Chair, he trained some of the top cardiac surgeons in the region. From the presidential address titled "K. Alvin Merendino: His Contribution to Surgery" in *The American Journal of Surgery* by Dr. George I. Thomas, Dr. Merendino's first cardiac fellow, stated "Merendino always believed that training residents was a two-way street, and he benefited immeasurably from them." In a letter to Dr. Thomas, Dr. Merendino stated "my former residents have had a great impact on my life... some may feel that I touched their lives in some way, but I can honestly say I have had the better of that exchange."

Dr. Merendino was known for his ability to innovate and improve on older principles, a trait he continued



K. Alvin Merendino, MD

through his entire career. The improvements he made to standard surgical techniques and the new techniques/equipment he created are numerous. One stands out in particular: he and his team helped to create the first versions of the cardiac pump leading to the production of the University of Washington's lucite-oxygenator. This cardiac pump was used in the first bypass surgery on the west coast. This successful surgery, writes Dr. Thomas, was "our Kitty Hawk, our Spirit of St. Louis."

In commenting on the surgical characteristics and qualities of Dr. Merendino, Dr. Shumway, at the 25th anniversary of the University of Washington's heart program in 1981, expressed it well: "Al's technical wizardry was well recognized...He was in the vanguard of that new breed of surgeons who were unflappable in the operating room despite the mounting tensions... They were never upset and produced an equanimity that was shared by everyone."

His longtime friend and supporting cardiologist, Dr. Robert Bruce said of his patient care: "he was gentle and

compassionate...His sympathy in times of powerful grief was always genuine."

Following his tenure as Chair at the University of Washington, he moved to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia for three years to become the Chair of the department of surgery in the newly created King Faisal Hospital extending his influence and that of the University of Washington to the Middle East. He then became director of medical affairs at King Faisal Hospital in the first year and advanced the institution into a post-graduate education facility. Following this, he returned to the University of Washington and directed the thoracic surgical service but was persuaded to return to King Faisal Specialist Hospital as director of cancer therapy where he eventually became the director of operations of an entire medical complex called Faisal Medical City. The chance to build the program in Saudi Arabia was unique and for him highly satisfying. He is quoted as saying "In Saudi Arabia, I have been in the unusual position of having the opportunity to help literally thousands of people....we have been able to serve as the standard by which the quality of medical care is measured throughout the entire Kingdom."

Those of us who had the pleasure to interact with him over the years will always remember his affection, sense of humor and his love of life. A private memorial service was held for his wife Shirley; five daughters; Cira, Nancy, Susan, Nina and Maria; six grandchildren and five great grandchildren.