

# On the Shoulders of Giants: Eugene E Bleck MD

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Gene Bleck was a well-known pediatric orthopaedist of my age. In 1983, my first year in practice, he was president of POSNA, I had studied his classic textbook *Orthopaedic Management of Cerebral Palsy*; and Duke's Chairman, J Leonard Goldner frequently and fondly spoke of him!

Dr Bleck began his Duke Orthopaedic residency in 1948, funded by a fellowship from The National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis. His residency was interrupted on September 15, 1949, when he was called up from the Naval reserve to active duty. He served as a lieutenant in the Medical Corps for 30 months including a tour in the Western Pacific during the Korean War. Before returning to Duke, he was recruited to serve as Assistant Chief of Staff of the Naval Amputation Center, US Naval Hospital in Oakland, California. He then returned to Duke and completed his residency in 1955. In a letter supporting his return to the Duke residency program, Dr Lenox Baker, the Chief of Orthopaedics wrote: 'While here, Bleck gave every indication of being one of the most outstanding men we have had on this service. We rank him among the first four or five men who we have seen in this program'.



His interest in pediatric orthopaedics was spawned during his residency, particularly during the 1 year he spent at the North Carolina Children's Orthopaedic Hospital in Gastonia. Dr Bleck stated that this experience solidified his interest in pediatric orthopaedics and served as his 'fellowship' in pediatric orthopaedics long before formal fellowship programs were established. Amazingly, while serving as a resident, he authored the Book 'Atlas of Plaster Cast Techniques'. He shared his royalties with his two coauthors, nursing assistants at the Children's Orthopaedic Hospital. Thanks to this, they were able, for the first time, to purchase automobiles providing them transportation to and from work.

Ralph Coonrad who had his orthopaedic training at Duke concomitantly with Gene Bleck commented: 'Gene Bleck is certainly one of the most outstanding and respected authorities on the evaluation techniques, examination and treatment of cerebral palsy in this country and the world. From personal observation during his residency training years at Duke, I would have to attribute much of the basics in his many publications and books on the subject of the cerebral palsy child to have originated from the teachings and time spent with Dr Lenox Baker and Dr Leonard Goldner. Similar to Dr James Urbaniak, Gene is a role model who can be characterized as a caring, 'doctor's doctor'.

At the conclusion of his training, he was drawn back to the Bay area where he joined a private practice in San Mateo. His mentor in the group turned over the state-sponsored crippled children's clinics to Dr Bleck. He found this satisfying work, if not financially rewarding. For the next 10 years, he dedicated much of his effort for and honing his skills caring for children with cerebral palsy. The classic paper *Locomotor Prognosis in Cerebral Palsy* elevated his regional and national recognition. His expertise in cerebral palsy led him to write the textbook *Orthopaedic Management of Cerebral Palsy*. First published in 1979, it is widely regarded as one of the most authoritative texts on the subject.

*Years at Stanford:* He agreed to join the faculty full-time at Stanford in 1972 where he was the founder and Chief of pediatric orthopaedics. He served as head of the division of Orthopaedic Surgery from 1982 until 1988. In addition to his position as president of POSNA, he served as president of the American Orthopaedic Association and the American Academy of Cerebral Palsy.

Newt Hasson, former Duke student, and other former Stanford residents stated that they were in awe of his accomplishments in the field of orthopaedics achieved while in a busy private practice, even before he joined the faculty at Stanford. They appreciated his dedication and commitment to resident education. They emphasized that he made the process of learning orthopaedics 'fun'.

In 1987, Dr Bleck well known as a prolific writer, composed an eight-page letter to the Piedmont membership outlining the state of medicine. Reading it today, it is current and very relevant to today's issues. He concluded his letter by saying: 'I am unendingly grateful to Drs Baker and Goldner for my Duke formation, although I still do not like the idea that residency time should be spent looking for X-rays to show at rounds. I forbid it at Children's Hospital at Stanford.'

Gene has been an invited lecturer and visiting professor in the United States, Europe, South America and Asia. Jim Urbaniak who was fortunate to attend some ASEAN meetings with Gene commented on Gene's great gifts of friendship as a visiting

lecturer to Southeast Asia: ‘Gene had a special fondness for Southeast Asia and frequently lectured, volunteered and was an honored guest by the Association of Southeast Asia Nations (ASEAN Association made up of Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, Philippines and Indonesia). The orthopaedic surgeons of these countries have a deep love and appreciation for Gene. They delighted in his entertaining personality and genuine respect for their culture. He made them all laugh when he interjected his eloquent greetings and deliveries with attempts to speak in their native dialect—the ASEANs all loved it. His unique wit and contagious humor in his teachings and in everyday life are, indeed, special gifts to all of us who are fortunate to know Gene.’!

In 2000, he was Guest of Honor at the Piedmont Orthopaedic Association annual meeting. There he presented several projects which were ongoing at Stanford including research in clubfeet, Legg Perthe’s disease and scoliosis.

Gene and Anne, married for 62 years, continue to reside in their home in Hillsborough, California. They continue to be charitable and faithful supporters of The Jesuits in appreciation of their ‘extraordinary contributions to worldwide education’. Their five children have given them five grandchildren, all boys.

**Robert D Fitch MD**

**Ralph Coonrad MD**