

## IN MEMORIAM

## John Vanatta, professor emeritus

Dr. John C. Vanatta III, professor emeritus of physiology, died May 29. He was 89.

Known for his devotion to teaching and his six decades at UT Southwestern, Dr. Vanatta taught not just medicine; he also helped first-year medical students learn life skills to help them adjust to a new, difficult field.

"He was of a diminishingly small group of the original circle at UT Southwestern, and we were privileged to have him here all these years," said Dr. Frederick Bonte, clinical professor of radiology and dean of UT Southwestern Medical School from 1973 to 1980.

Dr. Vanatta taught students in every medical class, from the time he arrived in 1947 to his semi-retirement in 1997, and then continued to tutor students at UT Southwestern and at Texas A&M Health Science Center Baylor College of Dentistry.

"There's a lot of anxiety in entering medical school," said Dr. James Stull, chairman of physiology and holder of the Fouad A. and Val Imm Bashour Distinguished Chair in Physiology. "John was a terrific coach, and he was excellent in getting students through that first year.

"He was really a grandfather figure and very much appreciated by the students. They felt very comfortable in approaching him and talking to him. He was a very giving, outreaching sort of person."

Dr. Vanatta was known both for his individualized approach to teaching each student and for his support for minority scholars.

"To me each problem student is a challenge," he said in 1997, his 50th anniversary at UT Southwestern. "I try to help them find out what they're doing wrong in their study habits. Each student is different, so each time it's a matter of problem-solving."

Dr. Byron Cryer, first holder of the John C. Vanatta III Professorship, endowed by Dr. Vanatta and his wife, Carol, and son, Dr. Paul Vanatta, to be held by the associate dean for minority affairs, said Dr. Vanatta's work will endure through the professorship and a scholarship he established.

Dr. Vanatta's personal touch helped many students who were struggling to adjust, Dr. Cryer said. For instance, Dr. Vanatta became the personal mentor of a student from San Antonio who had come from a single-parent household with tight finances, had never had a car and had never lived apart from his mother.

Dr. Vanatta "made a world of difference to him," Dr. Cryer said. "Within a few months, the student was completely turned around. You could clearly see a 'before' and 'after.'"

Dr. Al Hesser, director of student academic

assistance services in the Office of Medical Education, said he had asked Dr. Vanatta to partner with him in establishing the Vanatta, Hesser and Schmalstieg Excellence in Tutoring Award, with each contributing \$3,500. This award now is given each year to the student deemed to be the best tutor from among the graduating senior students. Dr. William "Will" Schmalstieg was the first recipient of the award.

Dr. Vanatta, however, went over that amount by recruiting his family members, and ended up contributing \$10,000.

"He loved UT Southwestern and treasured his contact with students," Dr. Hesser said, "and the wisdom that went with his many years of experience made him a valuable adviser to students coming to our office in need of guidance."

Dr. Vanatta also was renowned for his sense of humor. His final exams included a clinical problem in water balance, and the two students with the best solutions were awarded an ivy plant in a urinal.

His studies on the excretory functions of frog skin and toad bladders earned him the nickname "Frog King." Despite the tongue-in-cheek title, his work had serious implications in understanding kidney function and electrolyte control in humans.

He also worked with Drs. Arthur Grollman and Ernest Muirhead on the artificial kidney, and together they were the first to keep a dog alive with artificial kidneys.

Dr. Vanatta earned his undergraduate and medical degrees from Indiana University. He came to Dallas from Wayne County General Hospital near Detroit, where he served his internship and residency. He and several other interns followed their mentor, Dr. Carl Moyer, to UT Southwestern in 1947. Dr. Vanatta became an assistant professor in 1949 and a professor in 1957. He earned numerous awards and was named the UT Southwestern Outstanding Teacher in 1986 by the UT Southwestern Medical School Alumni Association. He was also the first holder of the Robert W. Lackey Professorship in Physiology.

In 2007 Dr. Vanatta was named an Ashbel Smith Professor, one of the highest honors awarded to faculty members by the UT System.

