

# Remembering Earl Thayer

Susan L. Turney, MD, MS

*Editor's Note: Earl R. Thayer, 95, who served the Wisconsin Medical Society in various roles from 1947 to 1987, passed away on October 25, 2017, in Madison following a brief illness. He was born in 1922 in Palmyra, Wisconsin, served in World War II and attended the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Following graduation, he pursued journalist positions at various newspapers before joining the Society staff as a writer in 1947. He served as executive director of the Society's affiliated political action committee from 1963 to 1967. He remained with the Society until his retirement in 1987, serving the last 15 years as secretary and general manager.*

It was my privilege to have known Earl, to call him a colleague and friend—and it was an honor to be called upon to pay tribute to him at his memorial service. I first got to know Earl when I became CEO of the Wisconsin Medical Society in 2004. He had been retired for 17 years by then, but was one of the first to call me and offer help, and he meant it. I started having lunch with him a few times a year, and when things got hectic, he always listened carefully and helped me put it all in perspective. And if he thought I was off track with something, he would tell me. At the same time, he was so well-mannered, polite and kind, yet he was tough. We could agree to disagree, but he would always be respectful and never allowed it to affect our personal relationship. That was just who he was.

After his retirement, Earl was passionate about maintaining a healthy body and mind, which he demonstrated one of the first times we went to lunch together. When I asked if he would like to take the elevator to the third floor

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dining room, he said, “No, let’s take the stairs,” and literally ran up three flights of stairs.

Even more important than his physical health was his mind – it always needed to be stretched. In his late 80s, Earl was still traveling internationally, giving talks in places like Prague on health care and health care policy. He had an incredible quest for knowledge and advocacy, and was driven and passionate about the way physicians take care of patients. As one person said of him at the time of his retirement “...Earl R. Thayer has embodied the spirit of this art of healing. It is a spirit fired by compassion, steered by integrity, and guided by knowledge. Though he may never have practiced medicine, his leadership and dedication have helped thousands of Wisconsin physicians better practice theirs.”

Even at 94, Earl still was interested in learning about and participating in Wisconsin health care. When Marshfield Clinic was celebrating its 100th anniversary last year, Earl came for the weeklong event focused on education, research, health care advocacy and policy – all things about which he was passionate.

True to his nature, he was honored and thankful to have been invited to the event, but it was the people who knew him that were grateful he attended. They all made a point to



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talk with him because he had done something for each of them at some point in their lives. Each one had a story about Earl, which really sums up the person he was and the legacy he leaves.

Earl made countless contributions to the Society and the profession of medicine, he was unflappable, and despite having a lot of power in his long life, he used it wisely. As was said about him at the time of his retirement, “...Earl has demonstrated a humility that transcends titles and leadership that promotes rational, human resolution of problems.”

In my experience, that was because Earl was very kind and had complete reverence and respect for all things. His faith was a guiding influence in his life and he always had a peace about him that he was able to bring to others. That is how he will be remembered.

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