

In Memoriam  
**J. Robert Willson, MD**  
(1912 - 1993)

Written by George W. Morley M.D. (U of Michigan)

J. Robert Willson, MD was born in Flint, Michigan, October 1, 1912 and died following an automobile accident in Albuquerque, New Mexico on December 16, 1993 at the age of 81. After receiving his primary and secondary education in his hometown, Dr. Willson's undergraduate years were spent at Flint Junior College and the University of Michigan and it was from the University of Michigan that he received his Doctor of Medicine degree in 1937. Subsequently, he served an internship and residency in Obstetrics and Gynecology at Michigan from 1937 to 1941. He received a Master of Science degree from the same institution the following year. Dr. Willson was certified by the American Board of Obstetrics & Gynecology in 1945.

Dr. Willson's career in academic medicine began as an Instructor and Assistant Professor in Obstetrics and Gynecology at the University of Chicago from 1942 to 1946. In 1947, he became Professor and Chairman of Obstetrics and Gynecology at Temple University in Philadelphia, a position he held until 1963. Dr. Willson returned to Ann Arbor in 1964 where he became the Bates Professor of Diseases of Women & Children, and Professor and Chairman of Obstetrics and Gynecology, a position he held until 1978. He maintained his professorship at Michigan for the next five years until moving to Albuquerque where he was Adjunct Professor of Obstetrics and Gynecology at the University of New Mexico School of Medicine until his death. In 1986, Dr. Willson received the University of Michigan Medical Center Alumni Distinguished Service Award and the J. Robert Willson Professorship of Obstetrics at Michigan was established in 1989 to focus on teaching and research in obstetrics -- two of his primary interests.

During Dr. Willson's professional lifetime, he authored three textbooks and over 80 articles that were published in our professional journals. He was best known for his senior authorship of the textbook entitled, "Obstetrics & Gynecology", which had nine editions over the past 35 years. One of his closest colleagues said, "He not only was an outstanding clinician but he also taught obstetrics and gynecology by the pen!" Dr. Willson was a member of several professional societies and served as President of the Association of Professors of Gynecology & Obstetrics, 1965-1966; the American College of Obstetricians & Gynecologists, 1970-1971; and the American Gynecological Society, 1979-1981. He also served as a Director of the American Board of Obstetrics & Gynecology, 1964-1970 and was on a number of editorial boards of our specialty journals. He held several honorary memberships in professional societies.

Dr. Willson will best be remembered as a quiet, deep thinking, serious minded, and disciplined person who was always willing to stop and discuss a clinical situation, give professional advice or provide personal counsel and who also had a wonderful sense of humor. He was a scholarly and distinguished educator, a keen investigator, a well-recognized author, and a superb clinician. His inquisitive mind and intellectual capacity were admired by all.

He was a thoughtful humanitarian and was very perceptive at analyzing social issues and in discussing social change. Never did one ask him a question without receiving a worthwhile response. When away from his professional activities, he loved to travel with his wife, Joan, to far off places in unusual ways; he loved to play tennis, and he was an avid reader.

On a more personal note, but for posterity, I quote from his philosophy: I don't treat prolonged labor, I prevent it"; "Mother Nature is not a very good obstetrician"; "In our zeal to do surgery to prevent disease, we

sometimes cause it"; "You didn't take your chance on a patient, you mean you took her chance"; and "It's what you learn after you think you know it all --- that's what really counts!"

In closing, it was Didacus Stella around 65 A.D. who said, "A dwarf standing on the shoulders of the giant may see farther than the giant himself" Dr. Willson was one of these giants who continued to be an active teacher throughout his more than 50 years in academic medicine and it is on his shoulders that many people have stood who will forever be indebted to him for their success in their professional careers!

Dr. Willson is survived by his wife, Joan; his brother, Jack; his son, Richard; his daughter, Ann; and two grandchildren, Daphne and Maurice Dr. Willson will be remembered as a scholarly and distinguished educator, a keen investigator, a well-recognized author, and a superb clinician.

He was the senior author or three textbooks

1. "Obstetrics and Gynecology" – 1st Edition 1958\*
2. "Atlas of Obstetric Techniques" – 1st Edition 1961
3. Management of Obstetric Difficulties - 1962

He revised at least 10 editions.

Sometime in the 1990's this textbook was recognized as the premier textbook "Obstetrics and Gynecology" in this country.

He was the 1st or 2nd author in at least 75 articles in peer reviewed journals.