

John Emmett Hall, MD

A Great Surgeon and Even Better Man

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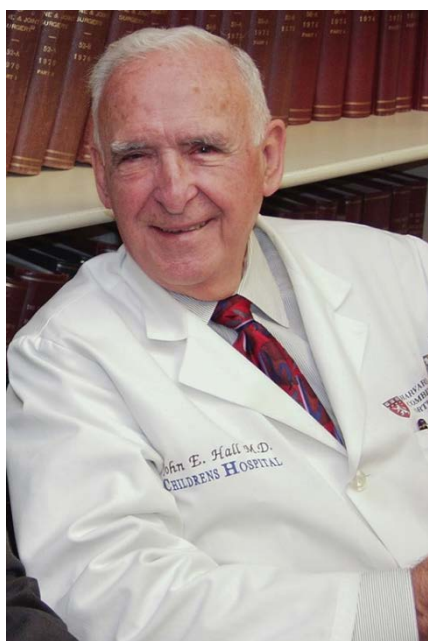


Figure 1. Dr. John Hall in Boston Children's Hospital Orthopaedic Surgery Library, Grice Annual Lecture, 2003

It is an honor to bring remembrance to John Emmet Hall, MD. I write for many who loved him, learned from him, and admired him from near and far. John was known to many as “Big John (BJ).” Big in stature, big in surgical skill, but biggest in caring and respect (Figure 1).

Let us first cover the facts of his life.

¹ Richard McCarthy, MD and Richard Schwend, MD interview with John E. Hall for Garner Pediatric History Center, May 3, 2009, Boston, MA.

Dr. Hall was born in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada in 1925. His impoverished grandfather, James Hall, emigrated from Ireland to Quebec. One summer when he was harvesting in western Canada, James Hall saw small town Saskatoon where they were building a university and decided to move his family there in 1910 because he “wanted his children to have a chance.”¹ It clearly worked because John’s father, Emmett Hall, the fourth of 11 children, grew up to be a preeminent Canadian Supreme Court Justice. Emmett and his wife Isabel had two children: John and his older sister Marian Wedge, a prominent Chief Justice in Saskatchewan and mother of John Wedge, MD, former chief of orthopaedic surgery at Toronto SickKids Hospital. Dr. Wedge was a dear friend and mentor to many of us.

John graduated high school at nearly 16, entered the Royal Canadian Air Force at 17, and flew B24’s and B25’s over the European theater, India, and Asia in World War II (at that time, B-24 Liberators were coming out of Henry Ford’s Willow Creek Factory at a rate of one every 2 hours) (Figure 2).

Like many of his generation, the war both defined his early adulthood and propelled him to his future. John decided during his military service that he wanted to become a surgeon. Upon returning home, he completed his BA at the University of Saskatchewan (1948) and MD at McGill University (1952). His initial surgical training was in Toronto (1952-54), followed by 2 years at Royal National Orthopaedic Hospital in London



Figure 2. Young John Hall as an aviator during WWII

(1954-56). He completed successive fellowships at Toronto General, Sunnybrook, and Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto (1956-58). He stayed on staff at Sick Children from 1958-1971 where he and Drs. Robert Salter (Figure 3), Norris Carroll, Mercer Rang, and so many others advanced the blossoming subspecialty of pediatric orthopaedic surgery.

In 1971, he left Toronto to become clinical chief, and eventually, orthopaedic surgeon in chief, at Boston Children's. As a professor at Harvard Medical School, he mentored many of the future giants in pediatric orthopaedics (Figure 4). In 1966, he was one of 37 founding members of the Scoliosis Research Society and its second president. Similarly, he was president of the Pediatric Orthopaedic Society in 1980, the precursor to POSNA.

Now let us get to why Dr. John Hall is worth reading about and remembering.

Dr. Hall was a master surgeon. Surgeons came from all over the world to watch him and left in awe.

There are operations for us mere mortals, and then there are operations only 'BJ' could do. Mark Gebhardt said, "He made complex and difficult operations seem simple



Figure 3. Drs. Robert Salter and John Hall perform a Salter innominate osteotomy at Boston Children's Hospital.



Figure 4. Drs. Richard McCarthy, Tony Herring, and John Hall, during floor rounds at Boston Children's Hospital.

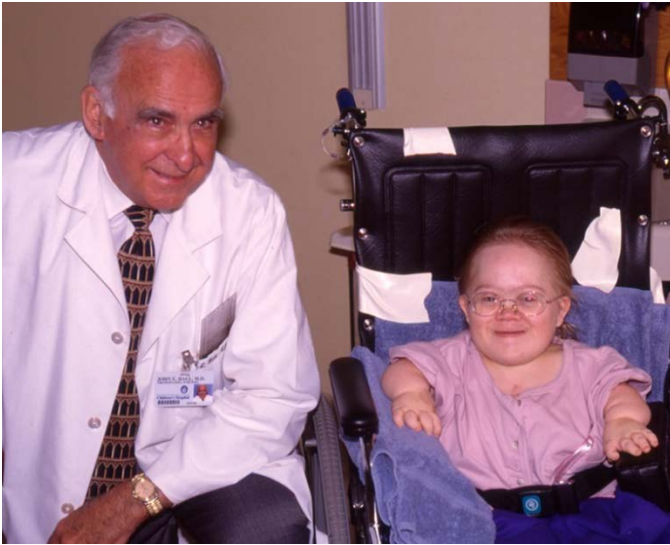


Figure 5. Dr. Hall was a man of compassionate care, and he dedicated his life to his patients.

and easy to perform; there were no wasted moves.” To paraphrase John Emans, “We all know God is Canadian.” Dr. Hall was an innovative surgeon. He pioneered hemivertebrae resection from a side-lying position with a simultaneous front and back approach. He was fearless but safe and was facile with interbody instrumentation and fusion to the spine through an anterior approach developed without a general surgeon. This included the split jaw approach to anterior C2 surgery.

Despite his skills, he was always willing to learn (he traveled anywhere in the world to gain knowledge throughout his entire career). To his colleagues and those he led, he was demanding, transparent, and honest. For instance, a spine dissection was scored as a “0” or a “100”—no in-between was accepted. A humble man, he occasionally gave himself a “strong 0.” He constantly pushed himself and the rest of us to excellence. He held himself accountable at all times. He understood that “surgical techniques will change, but only principles survive.”²

² Obituary, John Emmet Hall. *J Bone Joint Surg*: December 5, 2018 - Volume 100 - Issue 23 - p 2092
doi: 10.2106/JBJS.18.0104



Figure 6. OR room 9 at Boston Children’s Hospital is dedicated to Dr. Hall. This plaque hangs in perpetuity in this room.



Figure 7. Drs. Millis and Emans, with Dr. Hall on the celebration of his last day of surgery at Boston Children’s Hospital, June 2005

The most important principles we learned from Dr. Hall were in the realm of professionalism and included: listen to your patients and their parents, calmly explain your answers to their questions, never gloss over their concerns or the risks of surgery for their child, care for and about them, and always be available (“How can I help you?”) (Figure 5). He emphasized the importance of laughter, even at yourself. He modeled a culture of mutual professional respect in his workplace. Stories and warm remembrances abound within the hearts and minds of our physical therapists, nurses, and OR staff who knew that Dr. Hall believed in and trusted their expertise. To this day, dedicated upon his retirement, OR room 9 at Boston Children’s is the John E. Hall Room, “Dedicated to Compassion, Respect, and Excellence” (Figure 6).



Figure 8. Hall Symposium (2006) at Harvard Medical School featuring many former fellows and POSNA members who returned to honor Dr. Hall.

Those who knew him well still get tears in their eyes at the mention of his name. They all have a story to share. (Figures 7, 8).

Finally, Dr. Hall understood family matters. His wife Frankie of 65 years (Figure 9) predeceased him by 6 weeks. Their seven children gave them the joy of many grandchildren and great grandchildren. Just as John felt the power of generational growth in his family, he believed in it deeply and this carried into his surgical family. His legacy IS his family, both professional and personal. Every day I am humbled, blessed, honored, and motivated to do my best, because I carry his name forward as *The John E. Hall Professor of Orthopaedic Surgery at Harvard Medical School*.



Figure 9. Frankie and John Hall forever young