

William Kirkaldy-Willis

William Kirkaldy-Willis (Feb. 26, 1914-May 7, 2006) was someone uniquely gifted as a human being, physician, teacher, and scientist to bring logic and understanding to the Tower of Babel called spine care and spine surgery. A product of the English school system and Cambridge college and medical school, K-W was blessed with a disarming charm. His apparently self-effacing demeanor concealed an incisive wit and a lifetime search, akin to Diogenes, to identify those with, and without, integrity in their medical practices. K-W was clearly one of the true giants in medicine as well as spine care. His philosophies and his many brilliant medical contributions have clearly not yet been well appreciated by the medical community (much akin to the medical profession's failure to appreciate the advice of Phillip Semmelweis). His life's work will however serve as his legacy. K-Ws many interests, skills and humanitarian concerns have, however, been more readily apparent to all. K-W was a luminary among other luminaries who were his close associates (i.e. Leon Wiltse, Harry Farfan and Harry Crock). K-W also allied himself with the full spectrum of health professionals involved in the spine care whether they be M.D.s, D.O.s, PhDs, Physical Therapists, Chiropractors, Exercise Therapists, Trainers or School Teachers. K-Ws lifetime interest in spine resulted from his frustrations in attempting to do more for his patients disabled from spinal tuberculosis during his years as a medical missionary in Mombasa, Kenya in the 1940s. In 1965 he began his 23 year association with the Department of Orthopedics at the University Hospital in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada. During this period of time his insight into spinal disease and his unique ability to understand and advance the work of others led to his proposing a unified theory of spinal pathophysiology for which he coined the term "The Degenerative Cascade." This landmark work which has been well described in his numerous publications including the four volumes of his textbook "Managing Low Back Pain" (Churchill Livingstone, Publishers). It continues to serve as an important roadmap for those with a interest in traveling the "spinal highway." Few diamonds have exceeded, in the number of their surfaces the many facets of talent possessed by Dr. K-W. On the medical side these have included non-invasive treatments as well as surgery and the importance of back education, exercise, prevention and health maintenance programs. His vision and persistence were key in bringing organization to the spine establishment as a primary co-founder of the North American Spine Society. Less well known have been his accomplishments in art, botany, missionary work, philosophy and other humanitarian endeavors. His wife, Betty Kirkaldy-Willis, has been another North American spine pioneer in her initiation of the concept of "Low Back Schools" and advocating the importance of low back education starting early in life. As a leader in the spine community Dr. K-W has worked for balance while supporting the philosophy that the patient's welfare should be the paramount concern for the clinician.

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