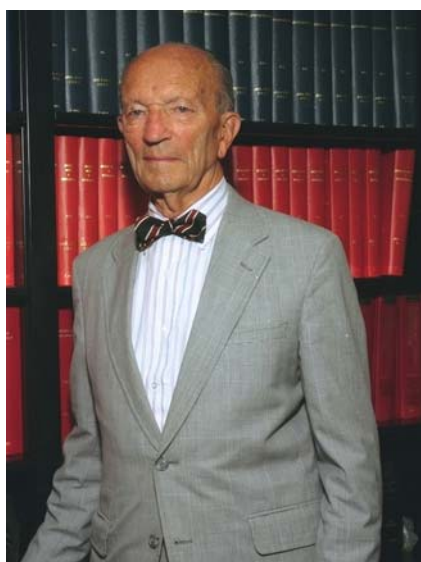


Charles L. Schepens—The Power of His Life

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Charles L. Schepens
(1912–2006)

*Lives of great men remind us,
We can make our lives sublime,
And departing leave behind us,
Footprints in the sands of time
(Psalm of Life; HW Longfellow)*

On June 24, 2006 a service was held at the Memorial Church of Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts to honor Charles L. Schepens. Though ostensibly the event was organized to commemorate his passing, it was in truth

to honor his 94 years of life, for a great man's death is made significant by the power of his life. Indeed, the impact of Charles Schepens' being comes into focus at his passing, causing each of us to marvel at the history he created. By dint of the way he lived, Charles Schepens epitomized an important period in the history of Ophthalmology, Medicine, and the world. His story serves as an inspiration to us all.

Born in 1912, in Mouscron, Belgium, Charles Luc Schepens was the youngest of six children. His father was a general practitioner who died when Charles Schepens was only 7. Like three of his elder brothers, Schepens became a physician. A mathematician in college, he was drawn to Ophthalmology. His first great contribution, resulting perhaps from his early penchant for mathematics, was the creation of the binocular indirect ophthalmoscope. Now used routinely throughout the world, this instrument revolutionized fundus examination and enabled the development of modern retinal surgery. As a teacher of teachers, Schepens eventually taught indirect ophthalmoscopy and modern retinal surgery to everyone in the world. Indeed, in France, the indirect ophthalmoscope is referred to by many as "Le Schepens".

The markedly improved success rates in retinal reattachment that were realized as a result of "Le Schepens" and a series of other developments in Boston for retinal detachment surgery, reaffirmed Schepens' belief that better therapies can only be attained through improved basic science understanding of disease processes and correspondingly enhanced diagnostics. This conviction led to the creation of the Eye Research Institute of Retina Foundation, which has diversified, expanded, and now bears his name. The Schepens Eye Research Institute has been, and will likely remain, the largest independent institute for eye research in the world. Through this great institute, legions of American and international eye researchers and surgeons can trace their professional roots, either directly or indirectly via their teachers, to Charles Schepens.

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Curiously, however, this important saga in the history of Ophthalmology might never have happened, were it not for the remarkable ways in which Schepens responded to the events of a horrifying time in the history of the world. At the age of 30, Charles Schepens was confronted by a world at war. Forced to suspend his medical practice and hunted by the Gestapo, he took on a pseudonym and acquired an abandoned sawmill in Mendive, France. Schepens not only transformed the mill into a viable business entity, but also a major conduit for the 'underground' rescue of military and political personnel, as well as the other activities of the resistance to Nazi occupation. Resolute to overcome adversity and prevail over the enemy, Schepens was very successful in this endeavor. These achievements were acknowledged (rather belatedly) by France during the final weeks of his life, when at the age of 94 Schepens was awarded *la Légion d'Honneur*. In a 2004 interview for the Boston Globe, Schepens himself admitted "It was a wonderful life, you know," that which was afforded to him and his family by this sawmill in the French Pyrénées. Indeed, he might well have lived his entire life there had it not been for another major intrusion of the war. Nearly caught again by the Gestapo, Schepens fled to England where he resumed his work as an Ophthalmologist.

It was in London where Schepens began his quest to improve the lot of those afflicted with retinal disease. In fact, the first binocular indirect ophthalmoscope was made from pieces of metal he found in the rubble of a Nazi buzz bomb that had struck Moorfield's Eye Hospital. But the prospects to continue this work in England were not good and in his words, "There was nothing left in Belgium to go back to", so in 1947 Schepens moved his family to Boston where he founded the first Retina service at the Massachusetts Eye & Ear Infirmary. Like so many immigrants to America, he came with nothing, but was determined to leave his mark. As the author of four books and 360 publications, recipient of every conceivable award bestowed upon an Ophthalmologist, founder and first president of the Retina Society, Inaugural Laureat of the American Academy of Ophthalmology, and attainer of countless other achievements, it would seem that he has indeed done so.

The personal attributes of courage and resolute determination that were forged during his days as a leader in the resistance played a significant role in his paramount contributions to Ophthalmology. Schepens was a tireless worker who saw adversity as a challenge to overcome. Though he demanded much from his colleagues and co-workers, he was even more demanding of himself. Apart from his daily swim in the waters of Nahant, north of Boston, Schepens had no major hobbies and deeply felt the significance of his work. Cette, his wonderful wife of 69 years, spoke longingly of the

time when "One day I'll have him for me. Right now he's for the world". However, in his 95th year of life, Charles Schepens worked until the days before his death. Thus, it would appear that Cette's wishes were sadly never realized. But rest assured, Madame, that your sacrifice is appreciated on a daily basis by millions of grateful patients and their doctors throughout the entire world.

My first personal encounter with Dr. Schepens was in 1984 when I began my fellowship with the Retina Associates and at the Eye Research Institute of Retina Foundation. I was summoned to his office on Staniford Street where Schepens introduced me to one of his oldest friends and colleagues. Together they described a series of experiments performed by this colleague that showed some interesting initial results. I was asked to design and execute the next series of studies. Although in my estimation the scientific questions were of only moderate interest, I accepted the offer, hoping to find a greater wisdom in the purpose. Less than one year later, Dr. Schepens' colleague died of a terminal illness with the knowledge that his work was being carried forth after his passing. Such was the respect, loyalty, and sensitivity that were quietly at work behind Dr. Schepens' thinking and planning.

Charles Schepens had a similar devotion to caring for patients. On restoring someone's sight he stated in a 1986 interview that: "It gives me tremendous satisfaction. It gives me the impression that I am not a parasite in this society, that I play a role. I am important to that person and it gives me more self-respect because I am not just after a good meal or a good car. Society has given me a tremendous amount and I feel it is my duty to pay back, and when I give sight to someone, this is my way to pay back."

Throughout his life, Schepens appeared outwardly as a simple, unassuming man. Though this demeanor concealed the great depths within, it is true that to Charles Schepens, cars were simply vehicles of transportation, not symbols of status. "A bed is a bed", as he said, so he always stayed at the Holiday Inn, eschewing fancier accommodations. The self-effacing grace and wry, whimsical way in which Dr. Schepens often confronted important events were perfectly embodied in the last personal moment I spent with him. Dr. Schepens had just been awarded the highest honor bestowed in American Ophthalmology – Laureat of the American Academy of Ophthalmology. Acknowledging how his work and ideas were initially received (poorly) by the Academy many years before, Dr. Schepens leaned forward and in his usual quiet voice he uttered the words with which he often began an important observation, and said:

"You know, it just goes to show you that if you live long enough, anything is possible."