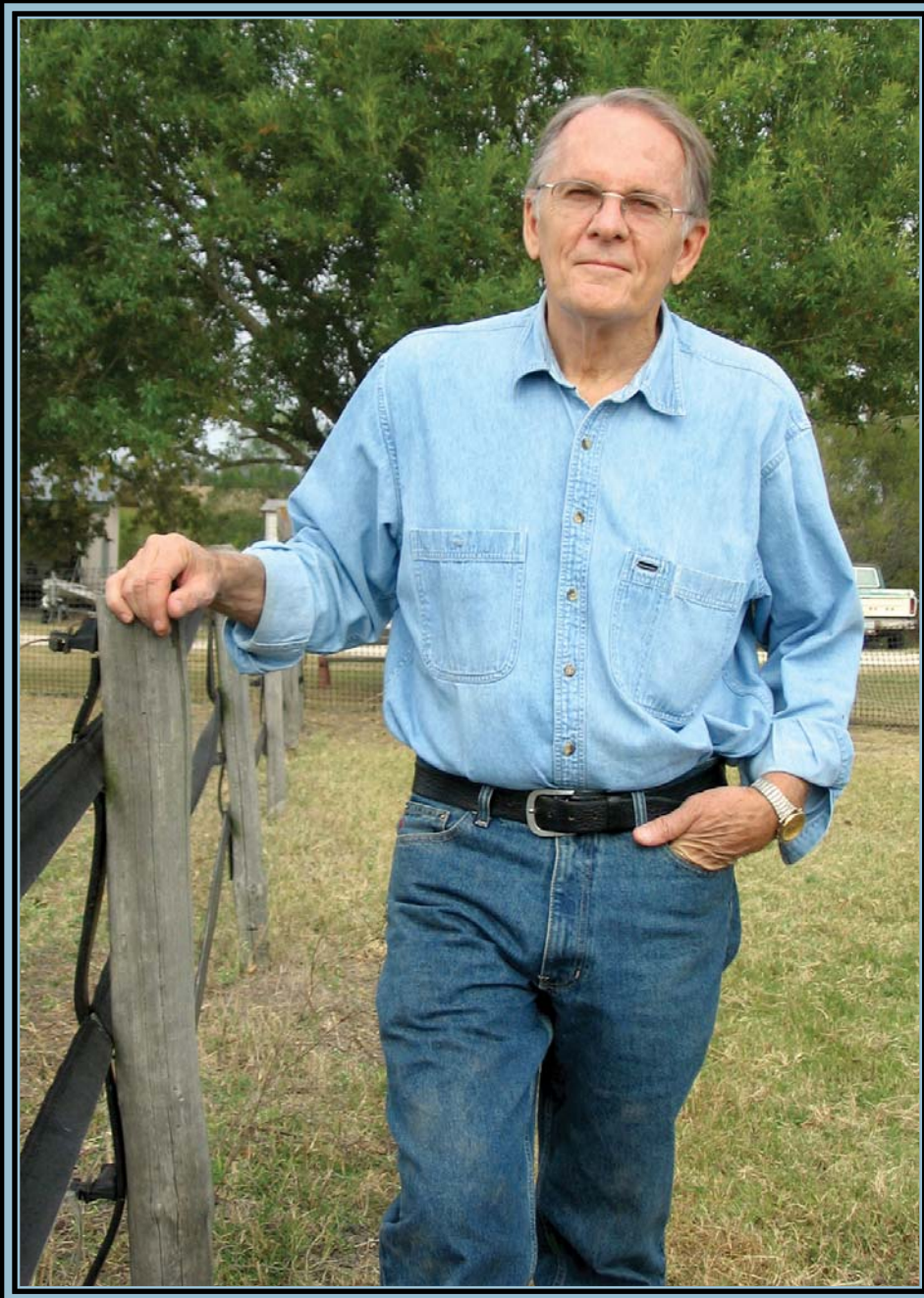


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Christopher S. Chenault, MD
2007 Physician of the Year

TCMS

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DEPARTMENTS

On the Cover
 Christopher S. Chenault, MD
 2007 Physician of the Year



Photo by Ron Mize

November/December 2007 VOLUME 53, NUMBER 6

THE PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

On Chance **4**
David C. Fleeger, MD

TRAVIS COUNTY MEDICAL SOCIETY

Year in Review **6**
Stephanie Triggs

ON THE COVER

Christopher S. Chenault, MD: 2007 Physician of the Year **8**
Merry Wheaton

TCM ALLIANCE

Literacy Outreach **11**
Wendy Kratzer

PRACTICE MANAGEMENT

Failure to Diagnose Tubo-ovarian Abscess **13**
TMLT Risk Management Department

In the News **10**
Take 5: Type 1 Diabetes **15**

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Christopher S. Chenault, MD 2007 Physician of the Year

Merry Wheaton
Freelance Writer

Being elected Physician of the Year by your peers is a true honor, one Dr. Kit Chenault was surprised to learn was being conferred on him. It recognizes integrity, knowledge, humility, compassion, and service to medicine in Austin and beyond.

Dr. Kermit Fox, the 94-year-old retired orthopedist who drew Chenault to Austin, had plenty to say about his former partner: “First, his ways in medicine were conservative, not deviated by the class or stature of the patient with whom he dealt. Second, his principles of treatment were as consistent as they were persistent. Third, his support for sound ethics and good morals, though seldom pronounced, stood clearly in evidence...” That’s a ringing endorsement and Dr. Fox wasn’t finished!

It means a lot to Dr. Chenault to be recognized locally, because it was locally that he served the medical community. “It was more concrete than working with the TMA and AMA and I wanted to support the community here,” he says. He served on many committees at Seton and St. David’s, and even more at Brackenridge, where he was chief of staff in 1990. In 2004 he was president of TCMS, which he calls “an active and effective organization—not a good-old-boys’ group, but one that tries to include all specialties in its activities. Back in the 50s, TCMS was instrumental in getting the TMA to move to Austin and in acquiring the land for its original office building.”

Back in the 50s... Back when Kit Chenault, the middle-child of an engineer and a housewife, was a teenager in the small rural community of Covina, California, where he and his siblings grew up on a 10-acre orange grove.

He remembers a childhood both idyllic and marked by wartime: “We played



Dr. Chenault and his '55 Ford tractor.

me in orthopedics was working on that truck. My dad had a shop full of tools.” Then at Pomona College he looked up to David Green, “a hero type guy” two years ahead of him who chose Baylor University College of Medicine and then specialized in orthopedics. Chenault decided to follow his lead.

endlessly outside, digging foxholes, and building a tree house into which my older brother would occasionally let me drive a nail, and driving a 1927 Chevy truck through the grove long before we had a license.” He also remembers how searchlights scanning the skies during blackouts struck fear in his young heart. With no family TV until he was in high school, he listened to radio dramas like *The Shadow* and was active in Scouts and Demolay. As he grew, he worked on that old truck to keep it running and helped his family plant hundreds of trees. “I was a farmer kid,” he says. Yet even before high school he wanted to become a doctor.

He cites two influences on his career choice: “I think one thing that interested

me in orthopedics was working on that truck. My dad had a shop full of tools.” Then at Pomona College he looked up to David Green, “a hero type guy” two years ahead of him who chose Baylor University College of Medicine and then specialized in orthopedics. Chenault decided to follow his lead.

It was a good choice. As strong influences at Baylor, he cites Dr. Ben Cooper (neurology), Dr. Donald Chapman (internal medicine and cardiology) and Dr. McIntyre (pediatric cardiology): “They were good clinicians, thoughtful people who knew their business, and good teachers. Dr. Cooper was very thorough in his exams and that rubs off on you, and Dr. Chapman impressed me by always sitting down to talk to his patients on hospital rounds.”

While at Baylor, Chenault met and married Sara Stinebaugh, a Houston native and a UT graduate working on a Master’s in Virology. They moved to Torrance, California for his one-year internship and a year of general surgery at Harbor General. Then, with Sara expecting their first child and the draft looming large, they moved to Cass Lake, Minnesota, where he spent two years as a surgeon with the Indian Health Service. He says that was a great experience, with the opportunity to do a lot of general medicine and orthopedics, and quite a bit of obstetrics: “I delivered 200 babies in my career. Not many orthopedists can say that.”

After that two-year detour, he did his orthopedic residency at the University of

continued on page 9



Front row l to r: Ed Remaley, Laura Chenault with her boys, Alex and Matthew, brother Larry and son Christopher. Back row l to r: Dr. Chenault, Alicia Remaley (daughter) with Mackenzie, wife Sara holding Alaina Chenault, Michelle Crider (step grand daughter), Laura Chenault (Chris's wife), and Andrew Crider (step grand son).

continued from page 8

Iowa Hospitals. Then, giving careful thought to the future, he explored 25 practices. A professor at Iowa suggested he look up Dr. Kermit Fox. He did and from the beginning, it felt like a good fit. Chenault joined Austin Bone and Joint Clinic in 1971 and worked with the group until he retired last December. "My partners were a huge influence on me. They were good surgeons and very ethical people. I never heard any of them utter a harsh word to each other in 35 years," he says.

This supportive environment proved especially important because orthopedics matured enormously during Chenault's career. Orthopedists got a whole new tool kit with a lot more tools in it, and new tools meant new procedures like total hip and knee replacements, rotator cuff repairs, and new techniques for bunion surgery, tendon surgery in the hand, and anterior cruciate ligament replacement in the knee. Chenault says he was the first physician in Austin to use a cast brace and one of the first, if not the first, to use an external fixator. He notes that almost all surgeries changed from the way he did them in residency. Such change made continuing education a necessity.

He attended professional meetings regularly to get the most up-to-date information and read a lot to follow the gurus and their new techniques, and says the partners also taught each other a lot: "One would pick up a pearl and share it with the rest of us." They were as happy

with him and he was with them. "He proved to be an easily compliant and valuable partner, fitting well the setting of our group practice," says Dr. Fox.

Dr. Don Greenway, another longtime partner, concurs: "He took on responsibilities no one else in the practice wanted... for example, planning our new office space. He was the project manager." Greenway describes Chenault as "a superb orthopedist, very conservative in his approach, who very much loved teaching."

Dr. Chenault estimates that over the course of 15 to 20 years, he worked with 75 to 80 residents in the Central Texas Medical Foundation's Family Practice and Internal Medicine programs. Some are still in town, he reports happily: "That was the point of the program: to train physicians and encourage the best to stay."

One who stayed is Steve Blair, MD, now in family practice, who recalls phoning Chenault during his orthopedics rotation about a patient with a dislocated finger: "He told me, 'You can take care of it. You know what to do.' His attitude was: 'It's not as mysterious as it looks. You can see on the X-ray what you have, so think it through.' He gave us a good grounding in analyzing a clinical problem. And he was always very respectful of what the patient wanted."

For Dr. Chenault, practicing, teaching, and serving the medical community made a satisfying career. He especially liked taking people out of wheelchairs and, through hip or knee replacements, enabling them to walk. He also enjoyed fixing children's broken arms. "They'd come in crying, I'd give them a shot, set the bone and six weeks later, they'd be all healed up and I'd send them off saying, 'Well, be a little careful, but we'll never see you again.'"

He says most physicians like medicine, "which means most have two loves—medicine and their family - and since medicine is a priority given the importance of patients' needs, it can pull you away from family activities." He coped by having partners that could cover for him, giving up

some of his interests like tennis and hunting, and making the commitment to be part of family activities. He helped Sara run PTA meetings, went on nine band trips, attended countless horse shows, and spent most weekends involved in the children's activities, even grooming horses with them when he was on call. He says, "If they were going to have horses, we wanted them to take care of them, so they had chores: they watered them, fed them, and shoveled out their stalls." That confirms Dr. Fox's fifth observation about Chenault: "He appeared comfortable living a lifestyle more simple than glamorous."

Now retired, Dr. Chenault still has a few duties as past president of TCMS and works part-time doing utilization review in Worker's Compensation cases. He still



Working on the farm

has horses, does some farming and enjoys woodworking. He made a handsome rocking-goat for his wife (who collects goats) and his grandchildren to enjoy. He sings bass in his church choir, is writing about growing up when he did, and is working on a history of graduate medical education in Austin from its inception in 1931 until UTMB took it over.

"I see a fair amount of unhappiness in practicing doctors, primarily concerning financial issues," he says. "Although that's important, I'd encourage them not to lose sight of what they went into medicine for: to take care of patients. And to enjoy the green trees (Austin is a great place!) and to develop some hobbies they can pursue when they quit practicing."