For the second half of the 20th century, the best known ophthalmologist in the world was Lawton Smith, MD. Everyone was mimicking the gestures and argot of the “simple country doctor” with the South Carolina twang. Mixing medicine with evangelism, he converted scores of medical students to ophthalmology, if not to Christianity. He founded the Journal of Neuro-Ophthalmology in 1981.

Lawton Smith, MD
Evangelist of Neuro-Ophthalmology

Born in 1938 in South Carolina, he attended college at Emory University and medical school at Duke University. During his ophthalmology residency at the Wilmer Eye Institute of Johns Hopkins University, he was smitten by the Saturday morning neuro-ophthalmology conferences of Frank Walsh, MD.

After completing a neuro-ophthalmology fellowship in 1960 with David Cogan, MD at Harvard, he briefly joined the Duke faculty in ophthalmology but was drawn away in 1962 to the Bascom Palmer Eye Institute, University of Miami, where he was one of the “founding five” faculty members gathered by Edward Norton, MD.

In his youth he was somewhat of a debauchee (“Any story you might have heard about me, I could come up with worse. I did everything rotten that a person could do”). But in middle age he had a religious awakening and became a Baptist minister. He prayed for each patient after concluding the examination. His colorful language was adopted by everyone who came in contact with him, and even by those who hadn’t! He referred to excessive medical work-ups as “underwater massages” and once dressed up a deep sea diver to illustrate the point.

He had defined ischemic optic neuropathy, internuclear ophthalmoplegia, skew deviation, opsoclonus, optokinetic nystagmus, light-near dissociated pupils, and isolated homonymous hemianopia.

The combination of lively oratory and diagnostic acumen entranced medical students, residents, fellows, and the most seasoned practitioners. For years, a lopsided number of graduates of the University of Miami School of Medicine declared for ophthalmology, a phenomenon traced to the magic of Lawton Smith.

After retiring from the Bascom Palmer Eye Institute faculty in 1993 after a 32-year career, he continued to publish his thoughts and experiences in ophthalmology.

The Language of Lawton

Acey case. An interesting clinical case that could be reported.

Big ignore. What a child gives the physician after the first attempt to get her attention.

Blind dog in a meat house. Diagnostic chaos in a medical case. (“They were runnin’ around like a blind dog in a meat house.”)

Cyclops with rotary nystagmus. A rare case. (“That case is as rare as a cyclops…”)

Doctor-killing abbreviations. Annoying—and often undecipherable—medical shortenings used by physicians.

Eats into your brain like a rat. A preoccupying diagnostic idea.

Glass cage in London. Where an extremely rare condition may be found.

Happy as a dead hog in the sunshine. Ultimate state of bliss.

Like diagnosing pregnancy with the placenta in your hand. A belated diagnosis.

Midnight in a coal mine. Very poor vision. (“He couldn’t tell the difference between midnight in a coal mine and an atomic blast.”)

Moment of truth. The instant when a diagnosis is about to be revealed.

Underwater massage. An excessive, expensive, and largely unnecessary medical work-up.

Wowser. Anyone demanding rigorous data before accepting a diagnosis. A “wowser malignans” doesn’t believe anything, anytime.