William D. Willis, Jr. (1934-2015)

After a long and very productive research career, William Darrell "Bill" Willis, Jr., MD, PhD, 81, passed away on Tuesday, September 15, 2015 at the University of Texas Medical Branch, Galveston. He was born July 24, 1934 in Dallas, Texas. He was preceded in death by his wife Jean John Willis, parents Donald and Florence Darrell Willis and William Darrell Willis. Survived by son Thomas D. Willis, grandsons Trenton D. and Skylar E. Willis, sister Mary Willis Clayton of Tallahassee, FL, and brother James E. Willis of Baton Rouge, LA.

He obtained a B.S. (Zoology) and B.A. (English) from Texas A&M University in 1956. In 1960 he received his M.D. degree from the University of Texas Southwestern Medical School. He earned his Ph.D. in Physiology in 1963 under Sir John Eccles at the Australian National University. Thereafter, he worked in Italy as a postdoctoral research fellow under Professor G. Moruzzi at the University of Trieste.

Dr. Willis joined UT Southwestern Medical School in Dallas to join the staff as an Assistant Professor of Anatomy in 1965. One year later he became Professor and Chairman of the Anatomy Department at Southwestern. While at Southwestern and at UTMB he edited some of the most respected textbooks covering the then new field of Neuroscience with co-author Robert Grossman, MD.

Dr. Willis joined the staff of the Marine Biomedical Institute (MBI) located on the campus of UTMB, Galveston in 1970 as Chief of the Comparative Neurobiology Division. He became the director of MBI in 1978, following in the footsteps of Dr. Steward Willis. In 1986 he became Professor and Chairman of the Department of Anatomy & Neurosciences and was named the Aabdel Shallab Professor (1986-1994). From 1994 until he retired in 2007, he headed the Cecil H. and Ida M. Green Department of Neuroscience and was the current holder of the Cecil H. and Ida M. Green Distinguished Chair in Neuroscience. He was Professor Emeritus in his beloved department, Neuroscience and Cell Biology at UTMB.

Professionally, Dr. Willis was a "giant" in the field of Neuroscience and in particular, the field of Pain Research. During his research career, he was elected president of several major scientific societies including the Society for Neuroscience, The American Pain Society and the Cog Hill. He did pioneering work, studying pain processing and much of the information known today about the major pathways carrying pain impulses from the spinal cord to brain (spinothalamic tract) came from the work of Bill Willis and his trainees. He was also a pioneer in elucidating the process of central sensitization, a phenomenon that underlies many chronic pain states.

His research program was funded by NIH throughout his entire career. He was also the editor-in-chief of two major scientific journals (Journal of Neurophysiology and Journal of Neuroscience) and on the editorial board of 10 others. In his life's work, he contributed to 311 journal articles, 103 book or textbook chapters and contributed to 12 textbooks. He was named by the Institute of Scientific Information (ISI) as one of the world's most highly cited authors (top 0.5% of all publishing authors).

The above speaks to his brilliance and industry, but doesn't convey that he was also a humble, kind and generous man. One of his greatest legacies is his student or colleague. He was a gentleman and a scholar in the truest sense. He seemed overworked and always had me to sit down for a chat with a student or colleague. He was a giant in the field of Neuroscience and Cell Biology at UTMB.

No matter his age, he remained young at heart, always willing to laugh at himself and happy to don any costume handed to him at Halloween or Christmas parties. He was always a sport. Dr. Willis was a master at multi-tasking, he excelled as the chairman of a department or director of an institute, head of a 20-person lab and first baseman on the department softball team, but he was never frustrated, never late for a meeting, never seemed overworked and always had time to sit down for a chat with a student or colleague. He was a gentleman and a scholar in the truest sense of the word.

A memorial and celebration of his life will be held at the Moody Gardens Hotel, 9th Floor Viewfinders Room, on Monday, September 21, 2015. Visitations is 5:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. and Memorial services will be held Tuesday, September 22, 2015 at 2:00 p.m. in the chapel of Galveston Memorial Funeral Home, 3901 Sealy Street. Interment will be at Crown Hill Cemetery. In lieu of flowers, donations may be made to the William D. Willis, Jr. and Jean C. Willis Research Endowment Fund, UTMB Development Office, 301 University Blvd., Galveston, TX 77555 or online at www.utmb.org. In honor of his creative and professional contributions, you will receive a Tribute to the name in the fund provided as it does not pull up in the list. The family wishes to thank his loving caregivers, Denise Broker and Barbara Mo-Chung, and Susan Carlton, is appended below.

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