



Dr. James Daniel Snell Jr.

September 6, 1933 - July 3, 2023

James D. Snell Jr., MD, who helped transform the field of pulmonary and critical care medicine during his 45-year career at Vanderbilt University Medical Center, died July 3 in Nashville. He was 89.

The founder of VUMC's medical intensive care unit, Dr. Snell helped build the modern Division of Allergy, Pulmonary and Critical Care Medicine, said the division's current director, Timothy Blackwell, MD, the Rudy W. Jacobson Professor of Pulmonary Medicine and physician-in-chief of the Vanderbilt Lung Institute.

"He was the unsung hero of the division in many ways, and influenced generations of pulmonary fellows and faculty," said Blackwell, who as a pulmonary critical care fellow at VUMC benefited from Dr. Snell's mentorship. "His thoughtful and rigorous approach to clinical care made me a better doctor."

"Vanderbilt pulmonary medicine was built on the shoulders of Jim Snell," added Robert Miller, MD, the Patricia and Rodes Hart Professor of Medicine, who also trained in pulmonary medicine at VUMC. "He was my role model as a clinician and an educator."

Born in Memphis and raised in Shreveport, Louisiana, Dr. Snell earned his medical degree from Vanderbilt University School of Medicine in 1958. He joined the Vanderbilt faculty as an instructor of Medicine five years later, after completing a fellowship in clinical pulmonary disease at the New York Hospital (now New York Presbyterian Hospital).

As VUMC's first fellowship-trained pulmonary medicine specialist, "he was a genius at interpreting chest X-rays and synthesizing the findings with information from the physical examination and medical history," Blackwell said.

Dr. Snell was the first physician in Tennessee to perform a flexible bronchoscopy, use of a thin tube-like instrument inserted through the nose or mouth to examine the airways. His research interests included pulmonary histoplasmosis, the impact of bacterial endotoxin on lung function and the clinical observations of asbestosis.

He directed Pulmonary Medicine from 1969 to 1973, and in 1971 competed successfully for a five-year pulmonary academic award from the National Institutes of Health that was designed to help medical schools recruit and train lung specialists.

This award enabled Dr. Snell to revise the pulmonary content of the medical school curriculum, recruit new faculty, and expand the scope of research and clinical programs.

Thanks in part to that stimulus, "Vanderbilt moved to the leading edge of clinical care for lung diseases," Dr. Snell told the VUMC Reporter in 2008. "We had an impact nationally, just from our own medical school graduates as they went on to residencies and fellowships at other institutions."

In 1972 Dr. Snell established Vanderbilt's medical intensive care unit and served as its medical director for 10 years.

Throughout his career, Dr. Snell's commitment to Vanderbilt and pulmonary medicine was evident from his participation on 37 medical center and university committees, including the Vanderbilt Hospital Medical Board.

He served as interim chair of the Department of Medicine in 1983 and was director of Ambulatory Care Programs at VUMC from 1984 to 1995. He also served as president of the American Lung Association of Tennessee in 1984.

In 1998, Dr. Snell was appointed VUMC's first corporate compliance officer, charged with ensuring that the Medical Center complied with government regulations. He held that position until he retired in 2008.

Perhaps his greatest contribution to medicine was as a role model for the best a doctor can be.

“Even as green, naive medical students, we recognized that (Dr. Snell’s) care and consideration for patients and for teaching stood out,” James “Bo” Sheller, MD, a Vanderbilt medical school graduate and longtime faculty member who has since retired as professor of Medicine, emeritus, told the Reporter in 2008.

Dr. Snell is survived by his wife of 65 years, Catherine Cheatham Snell, daughters Elizabeth Snell Olah (John) and Margaret Snell Alexander (Billy), grandchildren Jessica Hamill, James Olah, Ellen Fulmer, Katie Alexander, and Helen Alexander, two great-grandchildren, Leo and Lysander Hamill, his brother, William Clint Snell, and several nieces and nephews.

Phillips-Robinson Funeral Home, 2707 Gallatin Pike in Nashville, is handling funeral arrangements. Visitation will be held from 1 p.m. to 2 p.m. Sunday, July 9, at Christ Church Cathedral, 900 Broadway in Nashville.

In lieu of flowers, donations to the Vanderbilt Division of Allergy, Pulmonary, and Critical Care Medicine may be made to honor Dr. Snell’s memory.

Check donations may be sent to:

Vanderbilt University Medical Center Development

P. O. Box 290369

525 Royal Parkway, Nashville, TN 37229

Please include a note with the check or indicate on the memo line that the gift is made in memory of James D. Snell Jr., MD.

Gifts can also be made online at <https://give.vanderbilthealth.org/JSnell> Select the checkbox next to “Dedicate my donation in honor or in memory of someone.”

Natural burial will take place at 10 am on Saturday, July 8th at Larkspur Conservation, 155 Bear Carr Road, Westmoreland, TN .

What to expect at a natural burial:

Dress for an outdoor hike and wear appropriate shoes.

Use the restroom before you arrive, there is no public toilet or running water.

Carpool to Larkspur - parking is limited.

Plan to arrive 15 minutes ahead of time.

Family and friends will be welcomed at the trailhead by Larkspur staff and volunteers.

The casket or body will be in place at the graveside prior to the arrival of family and friends.

Family and friends will hike up the hill into the nature preserve for the burial ceremony.

Words are shared and the casket or body is lowered into the grave by family and friends.

With guidance the family and friends shovel soil into the grave until it is closed.

Hike away from the graveside and return to your vehicle or explore the preserve.

Leave no trash behind.

Cut flowers are welcome.

Cemetery Details

Larkspur Conservation

155 Bear Carr Road
Westmoreland, TN 37186
<https://larkspurconservation.org>

Previous Events

Burial

JUL 8. 10:00 AM (CT)

Larkspur Conservation Cemetery
155 Bear Carr Road
Westmoreland, TN

Visitation

JUL 9. 1:00 PM - 2:00 PM (CT)

Christ Church Cathedral
900 Broadway
Nashville, TN