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# The Doctor Is Still In: Secrets of Health From a Famed 96-Year-Old Physician

**A**S A YOUNG PHYSICIAN, Michael DeBakey was asked to gather data on patients stricken with lung cancer, a condition whose prevalence seemed to be rising. When Dr. DeBakey presented the data to his mentor, Alton Ochsner, the elder doctor was surprised. "You mean to say every one of these patients is a smoker?" Dr. Ochsner said. That revelation led to the publication some months later of a research article—scooping by a quarter-century the U.S. Surgeon General—suggesting for the first time a link between cigarettes and lung cancer. The year was 1939.

Dr. DeBakey's career would soar further. "Many consider Michael E. DeBakey to be the greatest surgeon ever," said the Journal of the American Medical Association this year. As a researcher, he deepened our knowledge of the role of atherosclerosis in heart disease and stroke. As a surgeon, he invented procedures and equipment used today.

But Dr. DeBakey, long a role model for physicians, now can serve as a role model for another group: anyone turning the corner on what used to be called old age. In 1965, Dr. DeBakey appeared on the cover of Time magazine. He was 56. Almost 40 years to the month later, the 96-year-old remains a player in the field of medicine, his most recent article ("Kismet or assiduity?") having appeared only last month in the journal Surgery.

Convinced that the health beliefs of any

still-working 96-year-old are worth hearing, especially when the nonagenarian in question is Dr. DeBakey, I flew to Houston last week to visit him at Baylor College of Medicine, where he serves as chancellor emeritus. Entering the room, Dr. DeBakey looked only slightly older than he did in photographs taken decades ago. Sitting down, he poured himself a cup of coffee with a steady hand. For anyone who wrestles with the health implications of caffeine, this gesture might have borne significance, except that during the two hours we spoke Dr. DeBakey barely took a sip of it. "This will be my only cup of the day," he says, touting moderation.

His hearing was sharp; I never repeated a question. Whatever subject I broached, his response reflected a quality that aging experts say is common among the long lived: optimism. Avian flu doesn't worry him: "We're lucky now to pick up those threats early," he says. He sees democracy prevailing over terrorism. He's thrilled that, world-wide, education is available to more people than ever before. "I'm very optimistic about the life that the young today have ahead of them," Dr. DeBakey said.

His personal habits largely parallel what doctors order. He always has been a light eater, and on most days takes only one meal, dinner, often consisting of a salad. "My wife is a great salad maker," he says. Though he doesn't take vitamins or engage in what he calls "formal exercise," he walks from place to place, putters around the garden and chooses stairs over elevators. He is on no medications, doesn't drink and never smoked. His military



Michael DeBakey, chancellor emeritus at Baylor College of Medicine

uniform still fits him perfectly.

But here is what Dr. DeBakey sees as the real secret to his longevity: work. He rises at five each morning to write in his study for two hours before driving to the hospital at 7:30 a.m., where he stays until 6 p.m. He returns to his library after dinner for an additional two to three hours of reading or writing before going to bed after midnight. He sleeps only four to five hours a night, as he always has.

Research has shown that remaining challenged, especially cognitively challenged, can provide a boost to longevity, and the topic of Dr. DeBakey's work is one of medicine's most challenging: how to battle heart and vascular disease. On that subject, he teaches, writes and delivers lectures around the globe. About five years after he put down the scalpel, he also is continuing to conduct outcomes research on his more than 60,000 surgery patients. Ticking off the deadlines facing him in the weeks ahead,

Dr. DeBakey says, "I am so far behind." But isn't stress harmful? In the Time magazine article of 40 years ago, Dr. DeBakey expressed scorn for the alleged ill effects of stress: "Man was made to work, and work hard. I don't think it ever hurt anyone," he said then. Now, that quote elicits a sheepish smile from him. "I was being provocative," he says.

Although he concedes now that stress can be damaging, he also believes that work is underrated as a health tonic. "What we call stress is sometimes stimulating and can bring out the best features in our makeup," he says, adding that no vacation spot could ever prove as relaxing for him as did the operating room. "Work can block out the unpleasant things we have to deal with every day. When you concentrate, you are not distracted by the things that are bothering you."

Asked whether there is a lack of respect for the aged in America, Dr. DeBakey says, "That works both ways. A lot of people, as they age, tend to become dependent... They get in the way. That creates resentment on the part of young people. If older people to the extent that they can would continue to be active," they would be respected.

During my visit, a second Dr. DeBakey—Lois, his younger sister, who has a doctorate in literature and linguistics—entered the conference room, looking just as vigorous as her brother and leading me to wonder whether longevity genes might be the explanation. But she, too, turns out to be an argument for staying busy. She handed me a book ("Medicine: Preserving the Past into the Twenty-First Century") that she just co-authored.

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