



Michael DeBakey

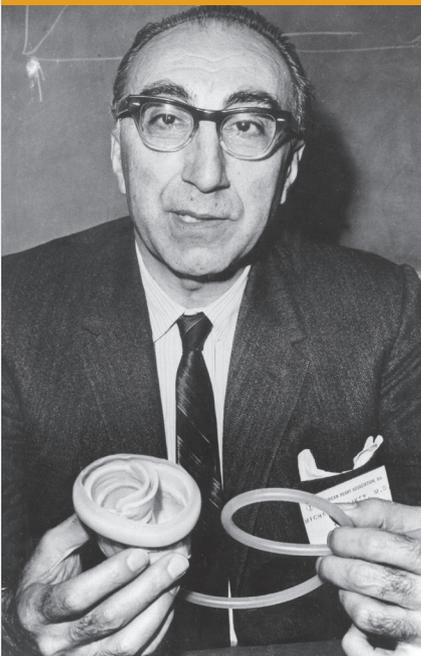
Heart Surgeon

Lebanese-American Surgeon Put Heart into His Work

He was born Michel E. Dabaghi in Louisiana in September 1908, about 20 years before the discovery of antibiotics, the first of five children of Lebanese immigrants Shaker and Raheeja. Nearly 100 years later, he died Michael E. DeBakey, considered by many as the greatest surgeon ever.

DeBakey's contributions to medicine spanned nearly 75 years. During World War II, his work led to the development of mobile surgical hospitals, called MASH units. He helped President John F. Kennedy lobby for Medicare, a federal health insurance program for people over age 65; he

Dr. Michael E. DeBakey displays a model of a plastic heart which he describes at an American Heart Association meeting in California, in 1963. Photos © AP Images

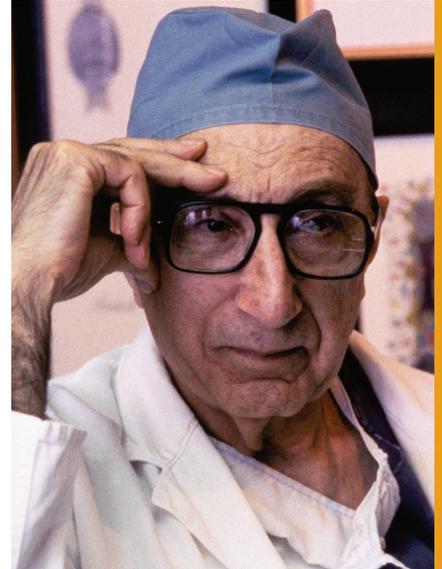


recommended creation of the National Library of Medicine, later authorized by Congress. In 1963, DeBakey won the Lasker Award for clinical research, considered the U.S. equivalent of a Nobel Prize.

His earliest contribution came at age 23. While in medical school at Tulane University in New Orleans, DeBakey invented the roller pump, the significance of which was realized 20 years later when it became a component of the heart-lung machine. Providing a continuous flow of blood during operations, the pump paved the way for open-heart surgery.

Though revered, he was at times controversial and occasionally ridiculed. In 1939, while at Tulane, DeBakey and Alton Ochsner linked cigarette smoking with lung cancer, a concept many prominent doctors derided. It wasn't until 1964 that the U.S. surgeon general documented the link.

Also in the face of skepticism, in the 1950s DeBakey discovered that grafts made of the synthetic material Dacron were excellent substitutes for parts of damaged arteries, and he made the first one using his wife's sewing machine. The finding allowed surgeons to repair previously inoperable aortic aneurysms.



DeBakey visited Lebanon in 2005 at age 97 and spoke on developments in cardiac surgery at the University of Balamand, which established the Michael DeBakey Chair in Cardiovascular Sciences.

He nearly died from an aortic aneurysm in 2006, and his own innovation was used to save his life. In April 2008, a few months before his death, he received the Congressional Gold Medal, Congress's highest civilian honor.

According to a 2009 article by his sisters Lois and Selma, professors at Tulane, DeBakey said his parents, who came from Marjayoun in southern Lebanon, set standards for excellence and generosity. His mother taught him to sew, crochet and knit — skills he used in developing surgical techniques. His father owned a pharmacy, where he talked to local doctors about their work.

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