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PROFILE

Ahead of His Time

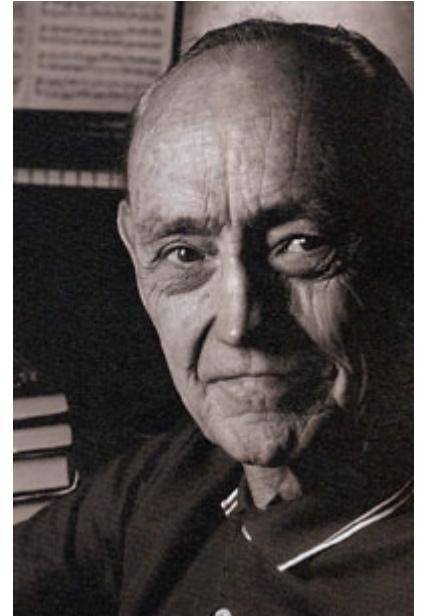
One man's holistic approach to living

WHEN DONALD BALES FIRST became a physician in 1952, the medical field lacked any real degree of subspecialization, so he ended up treating just about everything related to internal medicine from his office and the adjacent hospital in East Tennessee. At the same time, he served as president, chairman and delegate for a variety of medical societies, hospital departments and boards, as well as advisor to medical students as they pondered the pitfalls and opportunities of their chosen profession. Throughout his nearly 50-year career, Bales, now 78, hasn't just been a doer—he's been ahead of his time. He remembers giving a talk on the dangers of a diet containing cholesterol and animal fat as far back as 1953. ("It tickles me now when I hear these young doctors talking about cholesterol and animal fat as though they had just discovered it," he says now.) He also practiced holistic medicine even before the term existed, noting that "the good doctors" always approached treatment holistically.

Just as dedication to preventive medicine has been a life-long concern for Bales, so has humor. One of his favorite stories concerns the time his son, Don, was filling out a college application and reached the question "What quality do you most admire in your father?" "I thought he'd probably write about my years in service to others," chuckles Bales. "But, instead he wrote 'self control while playing golf.' I got a big kick out of that."

With this type of self-deprecation, it's no wonder that Bales—who recently qualified to compete at the Tennessee State Senior Olympics in several swimming events—attributes his stamina and health to luck, temperament and good genes. Although his father died of a stroke at age 44 ending a life of high blood pressure, bad eating habits and a three-pack a day cigarette habit, Bales says he takes after his great uncles on his mother's side, who were tall and lean. But exemplary diet and exercise habits probably haven't hurt.

Bales was a high school athlete, earning letters in football and basketball, but had to put aside sports during his residency and early years building his career. When he turned 40, he decided that he was getting a paunch and thin calves so he started doing exercises from the President's Council on Physical Fitness to build muscle strength and endurance. It worked. Later, in his mid-fifties, Bales became an avid jogger, even competing in several 10-km races. ("I got a third place medal once, but that was really because I had out-lived most of the competition," he jokes.) Problems with his arches eventually started Bales on a passion for biking that he still pursues.



But it wasn't until he retired in 1997 that Bales really stepped up his workouts, swimming 40 laps, four or five times a week. His wide repertoire of strokes includes the butterfly, which he learned at age 55-the same year he mastered riding his bike with no hands. "I try to do something aerobic every day," he says. "If I don't swim, I either ride my bike on a six-mile route that I've mapped out or use the stationary bike inside." Hales' bike is a 12-speed Motobecane that he's had for about 20 years. He tries to keep it in the toughest gear all the time to challenge himself on hills.

A true amphibian, Bales pushes himself even more in the pool. His road to the State Senior Olympics began when he placed first in the 50-meter freestyle, breaststroke and backstroke and the 100-meter backstroke and breaststroke at a qualifying event in his hometown of Kingsport. That led to later victories at the district level and his spot in the statewide competition.

He's also serious about his weight training, using a full circuit of machines five or six times a week. His numbers are impressive: he bench presses 140 pounds, lifts 150 pounds on the pectoral fly and 150 pounds on the quad extension, not to mention his ability to drop for a routine 200 pushups without stopping. "I've gone from 165 pounds to 155 since retiring, and I'm markedly stronger than I was before," says Bales. "I feel about 105 percent, but then, I felt about 105 percent before I retired-there was nothing I would rather have been doing than practicing medicine. I miss the patients, but I don't miss the hassle."

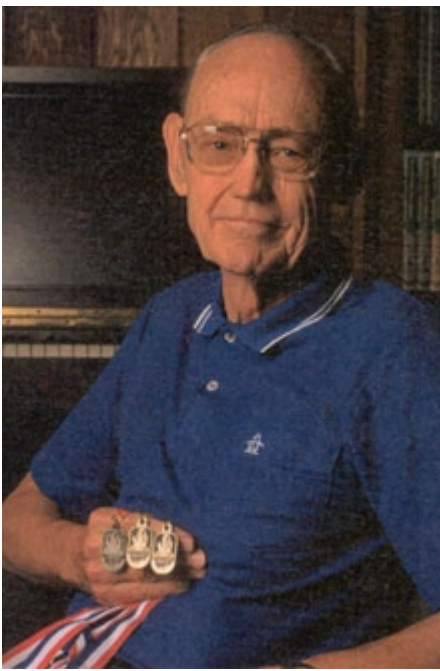


Solid dietary habits likely contribute to Bales' sense of well being, though he's no stranger to the fatty and fried foods for which the south is famous. "I grew up on all these things you weren't supposed to eat, like sausage, ham, ribs, backbones, biscuits and gravy," Bales admits. "And I like all these foods, but I don't eat nearly as much of them as I used to." Instead, he tries to load up on vegetables and fruits and whole grain breads and cereals. He naturally prefers low-fat foods, such as skim milk, to their fattier counterparts. (Here's where "luck" comes in, he points out.) He tries to avoid animal fats, though he will eat a little meat every so often and he isn't averse to the occasional celebratory meal at the International House of Pancakes. Because of his father's early death, Bales has never smoked and limits his alcohol consumption.

The retired doctor also counts on a few vitamins and supplements to round out his health regime. He takes both folic acid and B6 as a precaution against coronary disease and uses zinc and selenium to help prevent progression of a mild ocular degeneration in his left eye. Bales is a strong believer in stocking up on extra calcium for bone protection, making sure that Julia, his wife of 55 years, does the same. "The first time I ever saw her, she was carrying a table all by herself and I said 'That's the woman I want, one that is strong and can work.'" Bales recalls: "So, now I recommend that she take additional calcium so she can keep it up."

In addition to helping her lift heavy furniture, calcium may also allow Julia to keep up with her active husband. "I'm restless," he says. "I'm constantly in motion." Indeed, both Baleses take courses at the Kingsport Institute of Continued Learning where a group of retired volunteer faculty teaches more than 150 students everything from history and current events, to geography and Impressionism. Bales became the Institute's president last fall, at the same time that he himself was taking a seven-course load.

He is also an avid reader, who continues to get some 15 medical journals, and is a prolific writer. "I've written my memoirs and they're more than 800 pages," he says. "When I told one of my patients (who happened to be a psychiatrist) about them, he asked me who would ever want to read it! But, I'm hoping my grandson will. He's very historically oriented." Bales wryly points out that perhaps his science fiction writing will have broader appeal. He's written four sci-fi novelettes, three children's stories, one Western and a series of social commentaries, including a piece on the Clintons and a look at ways we are penalized for doing good in society.



Though all four of Bales' children have married Yankee spouses and three now live in the North, he works hard to spend time with his six grandchildren ages 2 to 14 from Connecticut to North Carolina. He takes one grandson, who likes old cars, car spotting, cheers on his athletic granddaughter as she plays soccer and volleyball, and makes an attentive audience for his granddaughter who is an aspiring flutist. The others, still young, already benefit from quality time with their grandfather. He and Julie visit their children whenever possible and when the kids aren't available, the Baleses pack up and head out on their own. Last year, they joined Julie's sister and brother-in-law on a road trip to Big Bend Park in Texas.

"He's a real inspiration to my brothers and me," says Bales' daughter Virginia. "He decided a long time ago that one of the best things he could do for his family and himself was live- so he set about doing what he could to work against his possible risk factors and make a long life possible."

Her father is thrilled to be getting his message across: "What I would like most is for my children and grandchildren to remember who and what I was." -Twig Mowatt

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