Frank Norman Wilson
November 19, 1890—September 11, 1952

The recent death of Frank N. Wilson, after an illness of nearly four years, brought to an end the career of one of the greatest scientists of our time. The news that Dr. Wilson had passed away suddenly, following an acute coronary thrombosis, came from the Wilson farm near Stockbridge, Michigan, early on the morning of September 11, bringing sadness and a feeling of great personal loss to his many friends, associates, both past and present, and to his students all over the world.

It should be recalled with a sense of satisfaction that Dr. Wilson’s outstanding work in his field was recognized, and tribute was paid to him during the year of his sixtieth birthday, well before his death. The issue of CIRCULATION of July 1950 was dedicated to him. One of his oldest friends, Dr. Samuel A. Levine, in the foreword, summarized his career and pointed out the unusual abilities and traits of character that led to his success. This recognition was followed by a similar appreciation written by Dr. George R. Herrmann, which appeared in the American Heart Journal of November 1950. These honors were climaxxed by the award of the Gold Heart Medal of the American Heart Association at the time of their annual meeting in June 1951. Although never demonstrative, Dr. Wilson felt these tokens of respect and appreciation very deeply. It was characteristic of the man that, in the letter he wrote to Dr. Katz accepting the Medal, he stated that much of the credit for his contributions should be given to his associates. Those of us who worked with Dr. Wilson know how completely he dominated and was responsible for most of the studies that were made in his laboratory. He wrote many papers on which his name did not appear as an author, and his associates often received credit for work that was originated and carried on to completion by the Chief.

It is not possible here to mention even in outline form the great contributions made by Dr. Wilson in the field of electrocardiography. Fortunately, this is unnecessary if the unusual character of his research activities is understood. No investigator in recent years has done more to provide a firm and fundamental foundation in a field of scientific endeavor than has Dr. Wilson in the field of electrocardiography. All of his work in this domain was done primarily in an effort to explain why certain changes appear in electrocardiograms under particular circumstances, and never was he satisfied with the purely descriptive approach that has been used so often in electrocardiographic research. Although some of his work, particularly early studies, were concerned with the cardiac arrhythmias and other allied subjects, much of his research was devoted to study of the ventricular complex, and his contributions in connection with bundle branch block, myocardial infarction, ventricular hypertrophy and abnormalities of the T waves provide the basis for much of our current knowledge of these conditions. His long familiarity with bioelectric phenomena, his keen and inquiring mind and his ability to use mathematics enabled him to devise the central terminal arrangement and, one of the most ingenious and basic concepts in the field of electrocardiography, the ventricular gradient. The former is now generally conceded to provide an indifferent electrode
with small potential variations throughout the cycle, and without it the whole field of unipolar electrocardiography, as we know it today, would be nonexistent.

Important though Dr. Wilson's papers and tangible contributions have been, his influence as a teacher and as an exponent of sane and conservative interpretation of electrocardiograms will probably be of greater lasting value. His profound knowledge of the electrical phenomena underlying the electrocardiogram made him acutely aware of the many things apart from heart disease that may alter the records, and he often commented that the more a physician knows about electrocardiography the more conservative his interpretation of the records will be. Much of Dr. Wilson's time in the last years of his active service in the Heart Station was devoted to informal teaching of electrocardiography to doctors who came from all over the world to study in Ann Arbor under him. Although this type of teaching was a constant strain and took time that he would have preferred to use in other ways, he rarely discouraged these activities, since they helped greatly to spread the gospel of careful and conservative interpretation of electrocardiograms. Many of the physicians who studied in the Heart Station now occupy teaching posts in this country or abroad, and all of them regard Dr. Wilson with a respect that is close to reverence.

Although blessed with the finest of minds, an amazing ability to reduce difficult problems to their fundamentals, a great power of concentration which frequently made him quite oblivious of his surroundings, and a dogged persistence which kept him at work until tasks were completed, Dr. Wilson was intensely human and quite devoid of pomp or pretense. He always had time to help others with their problems, and, even in periods of discouragement during his long final illness, his advice and counsel were readily available and freely given. Although Dr. Wilson's life was dedicated primarily to electrocardiography, he had many other interests and hobbies. Both he and Mrs. Wilson loved the country, and for over 20 years had spent more and more of their time at the simple farm near Stockbridge. Here he continued his study of birds, an avocation that began during his association with Sir Thomas Lewis during the first World War, and, from bird photography, his familiarity with optical equipment led to an interest in astronomy, which gave him much pleasure. His life was full, and his accomplishments were great. While his great work was primarily due to his own intellect and character, his wife must not be forgotten. Her devotion and understanding made it possible for Dr. Wilson to carry on and to reach the goals that he sought.

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