

Retired Executive Gave Up Golf to Create a Free Medical Clinic at Hilton Head, S.C.

Jack McConnell recruited retired nurses, doctors and dentists to care for the uninsured



Jack McConnell worked harder in retirement than he did before, his family said. PHOTO: BECKY DAVIS

By James R. Hagerty

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Golf was on the agenda when Jack McConnell retired to Hilton Head, S.C., in 1989. Then the former Johnson & Johnson executive found a different distraction.

In his chats with landscapers, waiters and others who worked in the retirement paradise, he learned that few of them could afford health care. Something, he said, should be done. A holiday party conversation around the end of 1991 sparked the idea: Why not rally retired doctors and other medical personnel to provide free care for the poor?

There were tricky questions about malpractice insurance and medical licensing. He resolved those by enlisting help from insurers and legislators. In 1993, his Volunteers in Medicine service began providing

immunizations. A year later, a new clinic was built with donated funds. The nonprofit provides medical, dental and mental health services to the needy.

Television reports about the program spawned interest all over the country. Dr. McConnell gave speeches and formed a national Volunteers in Medicine organization to help other communities set up free clinics. There are now 89 affiliated clinics in 28 states. Phish, the jam band whose keyboard player Page McConnell is Dr. McConnell's son, has helped raise money.

Dr. McConnell died Feb. 6 at age 93. He never did find much time for golf.

Dr. McConnell learned about the plight of uninsured workers because of his natural curiosity. Some of them he met by picking them up as hitchhikers. He also noticed the tumbledown housing occupied by the area's poorer residents.

"Sitting cheek by jowl, you couldn't ignore the squalor," he told the New York Times in 1993. "I couldn't drive by it and not ask why." The clinic became such a priority that his family said he was working harder than he did before retiring.

When Dr. McConnell explained his idea to a group of Hilton Head physicians, one complained that a free clinic would hurt his business. "I am surprised you feel the...clinic will take patients away from you," Dr. McConnell replied, according to a memoir he wrote later. "Just tell me how many of our nonpaying patients you want and I will see that you get every one of them." The physician stopped grumbling and became a supporter.

One problem was that few retired doctors would volunteer if it meant going through a long and costly ordeal to obtain a license to practice in South Carolina. When Dr. McConnell made a case for a waiver of tests and fees in certain cases, such as those providing free services, South Carolina's medical-licensing board snubbed him. He found a state legislator who helped push through legislation requiring such waivers.

The original Volunteers in Medicine clinic now involves more than 100 volunteer physicians and handles nearly 30,000 patient visits a year. The free service is available to people living or working on Hilton Head or Daufuskie islands, with a family income below 200% of federal poverty guidelines.

"It starts with the understanding that the person who walks in that door for care is not a patient or a disease," Dr. McConnell told the AP in 1995. "They're viewed as a friend and neighbor."

Jack Baylor McConnell, the youngest of eight children, was born Feb. 1, 1925, in Crumpler, W.Va., and grew up partly in Tennessee. His father was a Methodist minister who was never able to afford a car but often asked his children at dinner: "What have you done for someone today?"

After finishing high school in 1943, Jack McConnell joined the Navy and was put in a program that paid for him to attend the University of Virginia and then medical school at the University of Tennessee. He did a residency in pediatrics at Baylor University. Around the time he was completing his residency, he was diagnosed with tuberculosis. After spending a year in bed recuperating, Dr. McConnell decided to focus on medical research rather than working as a physician.

At American Cyanamid Co.'s Lederle Laboratories, he helped develop a test for tuberculosis and worked on the polio vaccine. While there, he met his future wife, Mary Ellen Rhodes, a biologist at Lederle.

Recruited to Johnson & Johnson's McNeil Laboratories unit, he helped lead the development of Tylenol tablets. He then was promoted to corporate director for advanced technology at the company, responsible

for searching out new technologies world-wide. Dr. McConnell and his wife made their home in Basking Ridge, N.J., until retiring.

About a decade ago, Dr. McConnell was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. He is survived by his wife, three children and seven grandchildren.

In his later years, he occasionally demonstrated his joyful nature by striding on stage with his son's band Phish to belt out "[Bill Bailey, Won't You Please Come Home.](#)"