Back at the dawn of the endovascular revolution, many other surgical specialties were vying to dominate minimally invasive endovascular procedures. Vascular surgery, the standard bearer of open vascular surgery, could have gone the way of buggy whips.

But this year’s Lifetime Achievement Awardee, Dr. Gregorio Sicard, was one of a dedicated group of vascular surgeon leaders who kept that from happening.

“I did not want to see vascular surgery be born and die within my lifetime,” said Dr. Sicard, who was honored with the 2018 Lifetime Achievement Award at the 2018 Vascular Annual Meeting.

In the early 1990s, the Food and Drug Administration and the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services were seeing a lot of technological advances and were being lobbied by many powerful stakeholders. Dr. Sicard, who chaired the SVS Outcomes Committee after his term as SVS president, spent many long hours in Maryland along with other members of the committee, explaining to federal agencies the importance of evidence-based, patient-centered decision-making.

“We were able to gain the trust of the FDA and CMS and to have a voice at the table,” Dr. Sicard recalled. “The committee pointed out the importance of patient safety and expected outcomes which led to these agencies trusting us. We weren’t saying this field only belongs to us. Radiology and cardiology could be a part of it, but they couldn’t take it over.”

Part of the reason their efforts were successful, he believes, is because the Society for Vascular Surgery and the American Association for Vascular Surgery had gone through a difficult but necessary merger just before his term as SVS president.

“You never know, but I doubt that this same outcome would have occurred,” he said, “if we didn’t have one voice, one society, one very coordinated effort, strategically managed by leadership. We survived an existential challenge, and since then the growth of the society has been astronomical.”

His efforts to keep vascular surgery at the political table were just one of the reasons for his award, the highest honor bestowed by the SVS each year.
“With this award, Dr. Sicard joins the list of luminaries whom we call 'the giants of vascular surgery,'” explained Dr. R. Clement Darling III, now past-president of the SVS. “He has achieved so much it’s hard to know where to start. As president of the SVS in 2004-2005, he was instrumental in smoothing the merger of two competing vascular societies. He has mentored 50 fellows, published hundreds of articles and book chapters, and was instrumental in ensuring that the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services didn’t lose sight of the important role that vascular surgeons play in endovascular procedures.”

The son of a surgeon, Dr. Sicard grew up in rural Puerto Rico, and earned his medical degree at the University of Puerto Rico. Though he now is officially retired, Dr. Sicard, 73, still reports regularly to his Washington University office to attend vascular conferences and rounds and has been passionate about training the next generation of surgeons.

“I always took that very seriously,” Dr. Sicard said. “If you live long enough, you have to train the next generations, it’s your duty.” Dr. Sicard was instrumental in forming the first fellowship program at Washington University in the 1980s.

He is particularly proud of his mentees. “A lot of them have become heads of their own programs, both in the United States and internationally, from countries like Spain, Chile and Colombia. One of my proudest achievements is that I had about 150 residents from Spanish-speaking countries who spent anywhere from a month to two years in our program.”

Vascular surgeons worldwide have traveled to Barnes-Jewish Hospital and Washington University over the decades to learn from him because of his skills in surgery and patient care. In 2011, a Distinguished Professorship was named for him at Washington University in St. Louis.

Dr. Anton Sidawy, one of the surgeons who nominated Dr. Sicard, said, “Greg is what one may call a quadruple-hitter. He excels in all areas of academic surgery; clinical care, teaching, scholarship and administration. He is a superb, innovative, and skilled surgeon. The Wash. U. Vascular Surgery group is one of the very active, most comprehensive and versatile academic groups in the country; Greg put that group together over 30 years.

“He is a surgeon’s surgeon,” Dr. Sidawy added. “I have met fellows that trained under him; every single one of them raved about his operative skills.”

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