

From: Roman DeSanctis, MD – Massachusetts General Hospital

To: Dr. Leon Smith

Sent: 2/7/2016 8:18:25 A.M. Eastern Standard Time

Leon:

Just wrote you a note; today I received word from the Massachusetts General Hospital that you had made a donation to the dermatology center in my name.

Thus, your gift is clearly in the right hospital channels. THANKS, MY DEAR FRIEND, for your thoughtfulness and generosity.

You are a treasured and amazing friend. This also means that you should get official acknowledgement from the MGH. If you don't receive it, please let me know. Keep up the great work.

The article about you (donation in Kenya) was fabulous. Keep up the great work.

Roman

FEATURE STORY IN BOSTON GLOBE

Dr. Roman DeSanctis said he has “always been a people person.”

By Liz Kowalczyk Globe Staff January 31, 2014

Whenever King Hassan II of Morocco fell sick, his emissary would telephone Dr. Roman DeSanctis in Boston. The next day, DeSanctis would board a plane for the royal palace. One day, a truck rolled up to DeSanctis's home in Winchester. Out came 21 handmade Moroccan rugs, a surprise thank you for being on call from 3,500 miles away.

The Massachusetts General Hospital cardiologist took care of other VIPs, too, during his six decades at the hospital: John Wayne, Henry Kissinger, and Red Auerbach. Yet, even as DeSanctis's reputation as an

expert diagnostician grew, you could still get an appointment — if you were patient, or had a special circumstance.

Bob Dias, who suffers from a rare blood disorder, got DeSanctis's name in 2005 from a friend who worked at Mass. General. "We called his office and explained we needed help," said Sheila Dias, who owns a pet salon with her husband in Fall River.

On Tuesday, the Diases were among the last patients to say goodbye to DeSanctis, who retires Friday. At 83, he is the oldest practicing doctor that Mass. General leaders can recall, and the closing of his storied career also signals the winding down of an era of old-fashioned doctoring.

Dr. Roman DeSanctis chatted with patient Gordon Ehrlich this week. DeSanctis has never worked with a nurse in his outpatient office and takes patients' blood pressure himself.

He has never worked with a nurse in his outpatient office; he takes patients' blood pressure himself — on both arms, because he says he sometimes catches problems that would be missed otherwise — and returns patients' calls. Unlike most doctors, he doesn't type medical notes on a computer in his exam room.

"Medicine keeps imposing things that makes it harder and harder to talk to patients," he said.

DeSanctis is known as much for his warmth and for going the extra mile as for his clinical skill, inspiring devotion in his patients. Over the years, those who had bypass or valve surgery were astonished to discover that DeSanctis — who isn't a surgeon — had "scrubbed in" so he could see how the operation was going.

Bud Ehrlich, a patient for 20 years, refused Tuesday to acknowledge it was goodbye. "I am not going to say it, Roman," he told DeSanctis, his voice breaking. The two men embraced and DeSanctis assured him that they would have lunch and that his health was improving.

"You're going back uphill," he said.

DeSanctis has been involved in some high-profile diagnoses.

In 1982, Kissinger, a former secretary of state, developed shoulder pain and was told he needed orthopedic surgery. But DeSanctis and Dr. W. Gerald Austen, a heart surgeon and then head of surgery at Mass. General, determined he had a cardiac problem instead, leading to a triple bypass operation. In a 2011 speech, Kissinger credited them with helping "save my life."

In 1993, DeSanctis cautioned doctors to get more testing before allowing Celtics star Reggie Lewis to return to basketball. They ignored that advice and Lewis later collapsed and died of a heart attack while shooting baskets.

"He is still a person you would call when you have an extraordinarily difficult diagnostic dilemma," said Dr. Britain Nicholson, Mass. General's chief medical officer.

In an interview in his office at the Yawkey Center for Outpatient Care Tuesday, DeSanctis described his philosophy: Treat patients as you would like to be treated. Be prompt — lateness says their time is not important. Listen carefully. Anger and arrogance are cardinal sins.

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By his own admission, DeSanctis is not financially efficient — his appointments run long and he refuses to write notes on a computer during exams. (He dictates them later.) But Mass. General has given him a

pass, perhaps because he raises a significant amount of money for the hospital from wealthy patients. The hospital has also allowed the Oriental rug to make his exam room more homey.

Patients of DeSanctis have included King Hassan II of Morocco, Henry Kissinger, John Wayne, and Red Auerbach.

DeSanctis has never worn a white coat in the office, favoring instead a pinstripe suit. He speaks softly and is quick with a joke. “You look good,” he tells Dias, “and that’s better than looking bad.”

DeSanctis grew up in Arizona, the son of Italian immigrants, and graduated from Harvard Medical School in 1955. He trained at Mass. General and joined the staff in 1960.

Asked how he became such a renowned diagnostician — he hears heart murmurs others miss and is known for his ability to diagnose disease from patterns he sees in basic X-rays — DeSanctis said he was “taught by the masters,” at a time when physically examining the patient and taking a medical history were a doctor’s most crucial tools. Colleagues say he has an uncanny ability to remember details about patients’ lives and about research articles.

DeSanctis has trained hundreds of cardiologists, and in 2007 he received the first MGH Trustees’ Medal, which recognizes individuals who have made a “monumental and lasting impact.”

Dr. Patrick O’Gara, director of clinical cardiology at Brigham and Women’s Hospital, met DeSanctis as an intern in 1978. One day in the emergency room, a patient came in with atrial fibrillation. O’Gara asked him whether he had “palpitations” and “shortness of breath,” telltale signs.

“In my youthful rush, I was trying to get to the right answer,” O’Gara said. “Roman looked at me and said calmly, ‘Don’t ask leading questions.’ This was a life lesson taught by the master at the bedside.”

Doing rounds late at night on the inpatient units, DeSanctis always sat down next to the patient’s bed, even after a long day. He never stood. “He taught me how to be a doctor,” O’Gara said.

In a workplace known for its crushing hours, DeSanctis stood out for putting in long days; he usually arrived at 5:30 a.m. and stayed until 9 or 10 p.m. His wife, Ruth, and their four daughters, now in their 50s, were understanding. Birthday candles were often blown out and cake eaten at 6 a.m. so he could celebrate with the family and go in to work only slightly late.

DeSanctis has won dozens of awards for teaching, some of which he displays on his office walls rather than diplomas. He is retiring in part to spend more time with his wife, and because he no longer has the stamina to drive into the hospital in the middle of the night to see a patient with chest pains in the emergency room.

DeSanctis said he plans to continue teaching and fund-raising. On Tuesday, he described to patients the new cardiologists he had hand-picked for them.

“You grow to love this man,” said longtime patient Elaine Siegel. “He’s old world.”