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## Dr. Gordon Katske is named one of America's top doctors

By Marianne L. Hamilton, Silicon Valley Community Newspapers  
Posted: 05/20/2013 07:31:43 PM PDT  
Updated: 05/21/2013 09:42:35 AM PDT



Dr Gordon Katske stands in the operating room at Good Samaritan Hospital where he has performed numerous open heart surgeries. (Photograph by George Sakkestad)

As soon as he extracted the letter from the envelope that had arrived in the day's mail, Dr. Gordon Katske suppressed a snicker. Beneath an authentic-looking logo from U.S. News & World Report, several paragraphs of complimentary prose informed him that he had been selected as one of the country's top cardiac and thoracic surgeons for 2012-2013.

Wandering out to the reception area of his Los Gatos offices, Katske showed the sheet to his nurse and filled her in on the joke. Then he pointed to the area on the page that he was confident would prove the undoing of his clever colleague: A phone number was included with the "announcement."

Planning to catch his friend in the ruse and possibly share a few chuckles before returning to his round of appointments, Katske called the number. When the receptionist answered with the name of the venerable newsmagazine, Katske was even more impressed with the sophistication of the practical joke.

"I thought, 'Wow, this really sounds official!'" Katske says, laughing. "I asked to speak with the person who was involved with the 'country's best surgeons' selection, and was immediately connected to a guy who also sounded official. I said, 'Listen, I just want to know which of my friends had the Photoshop skills to pull this off; I know it's a huge joke.'"

But the man taking Katske's call was no joker: He informed the Saratoga resident that a survey of his peers had earned him a spot on the publication's prestigious list of superior surgeons. What's more, Katske would be included on the magazine's website in even more exclusive subcategories, as an ATD (America's top doctor), and as a member of the top 1 percent in his specialty in the U.S.

The latter had been judged by Castle Connolly Medical Ltd., whose physician-led research teams identify the country's best and brightest medical professionals.

The plaques signifying both honors now grace the walls of Katske's Knowles Drive offices. They're surrounded by rows upon rows of others from professional organizations, hospitals, universities, medical clinics, research facilities, friends and countless former patients, all attesting to the caliber of attentive care Katske delivers. It's a fitting tribute to the soft-

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spoken, unassuming man whose wish to heal has never wavered since he first whispered it in his evening childhood prayers.

Katske was born into a family that considered serving others to be the noblest of all professions. In his father's case, that led to a medical degree secured at Johns Hopkins and a residency at Harvard, followed by a stint in the U.S. Army's famed 101st Airborne Division during World War II. One of the first physicians to volunteer to work near the front lines to care for those injured in battle, the elder Dr. Katske ministered to soldiers during the invasion of Normandy. The post-war years found him setting up practice in Boston, where he and his wife Joyce welcomed sons Gordon and Floyd (now a Southern California-based urologist).

When the Korean War broke out, the elder Katske again volunteered for service. But this time a mandatory physical revealed the cancer that took his life shortly afterward. It is perhaps no coincidence that his oldest son has since become a leading expert in thoracic surgical oncology.

As members of a devoutly Jewish family, Gordon and his brother both marked their passage into adolescence with traditional bar mitzvah ceremonies. Just prior to his reading from the Torah, Katske first verbalized his secret dream.

"The rabbi told me that on the day of your bar mitzvah, God pays extra-special attention to your prayers," Katske said. "I figured he knew what he was talking about, so I said the same thing I'd prayed for every night since I was little: 'God, please make me smart enough and talented enough and strong enough to be a doctor, so I can heal the sick and the infirm and those in pain. And if you do, I promise I'll always honor you and never forget you.'"

In time the rabbi was proved right. Following in his father's footsteps, Katske enlisted in the Air Force just as the war in Vietnam was heating up. He became a pilot (call-sign: "Doc") of helicopters and F-4 fighter jets, emerging at barely 20 years of age as a much-decorated captain (and still healing from injuries sustained when his chopper was shot down in enemy territory).

In rapid succession he completed graduate studies at Harvard and earned his M.D. at Chicago Medical School. From among several job offers Katske selected a post at the Cleveland Medical Clinic, where he performed groundbreaking research and perfected surgical techniques that were to change the practice of modern medicine--and add to those rows of plaques.

For example, prior to the days of routine blood screening, Katske and his colleagues were puzzled by the number of patients who sailed through their surgeries, only to succumb to such blood-borne diseases as hepatitis--and later, AIDS--after blood transfusions. Katske had a simple but brilliant brainstorm: Capture and cleanse a patient's own blood during surgery, and then reinfuse it into their bodies. Thus was created the "cell saver" (intraoperative cell salvage machine), which is now used in surgical environments around the globe.

"That one got a lot of notoriety," Katske says simply. As word of the invention began to spread, he was recruited to give a series of lectures about its use to the international surgical community. The Swiss, in particular, were eager to learn about the new blood harvesting technique. Katske agreed to speak to the surgeons, but with characteristic modesty expressed puzzlement about why he'd been invited.

"I was told that at the time Switzerland did more cardiac and thoracic surgeries than any country in Europe. But since their population was so small, there wasn't enough blood donated to supply all of the cases, so they had to limit the number of procedures they did. They said with this new device, they could expand that and change medical care in their country. That was pretty gratifying," Katske says.

Katske also was a member of the team that implanted the very first artificial hearts. Invented by Dr. Yukihiro Nosé, chairman of Cleveland Clinic's Department of Artificial Organs, the device became known as the "Jarvik Heart" after Nosé left Cleveland to work at the University of Utah with Dr. Robert Jarvik. "When I was a part of Dr. Nosé's team, we were the 'installers' of the hearts," Katske says. "Back then we did the surgeries on calves."

At one point Katske was selected for a surgical fellowship in the U.K., where he completed what he refers to as "arcane" research into ways to modify the human body's immune system to facilitate organ transplantation, then an emerging field. "I published the paper with some colleagues at Harvard, and that was that; never in a million years did I imagine anyone would actually read it," Katske recalls.

But approximately 15 years later, Katske was in the midst of a surgical procedure when a nurse tapped him on the shoulder and alerted him that his presence was urgently required: In the reception area, a uniformed man was holding a sheaf of papers, and insisting on seeing the surgeon immediately. "She whispered, 'Dr. Katske, I'm not sure this is necessarily good news,'" he adds.

With a sense of foreboding Katske completed the procedure and went to meet the stranger, who stood with military bearing and spoke with a cultured British accent. Complying with a request to present identification, Katske then politely inquired as to the purpose of the visit. To this day, he says he was floored by the response.

"The man said, 'I represent her majesty the queen of England, and she has asked me to deliver these documents to you; please sign them.' I was dumbfounded, even more so when I saw that I was being inducted into the Royal Society of Medicine by appointment of the queen."

Katske was then informed that for several years, his long-forgotten paper had pointed the way for British surgeons to perform successful heart, kidney and lung transplants. "He said, 'Your research is pivotal to our new approach to preventing rejection in these transplants.' And I said, 'Oh, that's really nice.' Later, they sent me a plaque. ... It's not one you can exactly ignore," Katske says, laughing again.

Throughout his career, Katske--who has been on the staff at the Roswell Park Cancer Institute (where he completed his training in oncology), Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, Brigham and Women's Hospital and other leading research and teaching institutions--has lectured extensively about his medical innovations to the global medical community. It was one such lecture that led to Katske's transfer to California.

During a talk in Tucson, surgeons posed questions by handing Katske small slips of paper, which he then read and answered extemporaneously. Working his way through the pile, Katske came across an intriguing invitation: "If you come with me to San Jose, you'll never go back to Cleveland." At the conclusion of his presentation, the author of the message strolled up and began a conversation with Katske, who realized that his career just might be taking a fascinating turn. "Newell Wood said, 'San Jose's an up and coming place, and we need someone like you; you can do so much good there.' Newell became my partner, and a very dear friend."

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It helped that Wood arranged to have a chauffeur-driven Bentley pick Katske up at San Jose Airport for a tour of South Bay hospitals. Knowing of Katske's passion for sailing, Wood also arranged for excursions on Monterey Bay and San Francisco Bay. But when Katske got his first glimpse of Los Gatos, he needed little encouragement to leave Cleveland's snowy winters and steamy summers behind.

"I remember Newell driving me up Blossom Hill Road, and seeing this carpet of flowers of every possible color, and thinking, 'My God, this is heaven.' And it struck me that while the people at Cleveland Clinic were, and are, brilliant and aggressive and the very best of the best, working there was like being part of a big corporation. I could never practice in a very intimate way, and really get to know my patients. This was the chance to do that."

Katske joined forces with Wood in 1980, taking over the practice when his partner retired. Some 40-plus years later, Katske still maintains a schedule that would tax practitioners half his age. He occasionally finds time to sail, although the demands of his job forced him to sell his own craft a year ago. However, nautically themed gifts--including a towering replica of the Columbia, winner of the 1899 and 1901 America's Cup--from his international coterie of grateful patients crowd his workspace.

His desk is slowly being overtaken with special thank-yous as well, although here it's all about baseball: Katske's successful surgery on the wife of baseball Hall of Famer Carl Yastrzemski led the Red Sox left fielder to autograph a baseball in gratitude. Encased in glass, the appearance of that first ball has prompted patients to proffer several others inscribed by the likes of Sandy Koufax, Sammy Sosa and even Babe Ruth.

Katske says he and his wife Leslie (a nurse he describes as having "superb technical knowledge") are proudest of the accomplishments of their three children: Jennifer, a nurse at Baylor University Medical Center, who assists with multi-organ transplants; Aaron, a local IT professional; and Erica, an Oakland-based child psychologist. Mom and Dad revel in caring for their flock of grandchildren as well, although Katske's wife sometimes wonders where he finds the energy to routinely take concerned patients' calls to his cell phone at 2 a.m.

The answer, Katske says, is that he could never imagine himself doing anything else.

"If someone's ill and reaches out to you, it's the greatest compliment in the world. They're saying, 'Help me, I'm sick. I need you.' People trust me and give their lives to me, which is the most precious item they own. What greater gift could there be?"

Plaques, boats and baseballs aren't a bad second choice.

Dr. Gordon Katske's offices are located at 555 Knowles Drive, Suite 100, in Los Gatos. More information is available at [drkatske.com](http://drkatske.com) or 408.395.2299.

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