Donald L. Morton, M.D., 50-year member of the AACR, died on Jan. 10, 2014, at the age of 79. Morton was chief of the melanoma program and director of the surgical oncology fellowship program for 39 years at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and at the John Wayne Cancer Institute St. John’s Health Center in Santa Monica, Calif. He was also professor emeritus at the UCLA David Geffen School of Medicine and distinguished professor of the John Wayne Cancer Institute. He first joined the AACR in 1963.

Morton was an academic surgeon and pioneer in melanoma, surgery, and immunotherapy treatment. He was noted for developing the sentinel lymph node concept now practiced worldwide for many cancers and changed the American Joint Committee on Cancer and classification of malignant tumors staging systems. Additionally, he was a pioneer of cancer vaccine and immunotherapy research for cancer.

Born Sept. 12, 1934, Morton grew up in West Virginia and graduated from the University of California, Berkeley. He received his medical degree from the University of California, San Francisco, and began working at the National Cancer Institute (NCI) in 1960. During his tenure at UCLA, Morton treated movie icon John Wayne, whose children went on to support the John Wayne Cancer Institute in 1981, of which Morton was the founding member along with Wayne’s son, Michael.

An advocate of training young clinicians in academic clinical translational research, Morton was also known for promoting academic surgical oncology and pioneering the official board certification program of academic and clinical surgical oncology training of surgery fellows. Surgical oncology was not yet recognized as a specialty within general surgery in 1971, when Morton became professor and chief of the division of surgical oncology at UCLA, and his division provided an example for other medical schools.

Morton had published more than 880 manuscripts throughout his career and, along with Emil Frei and James Holland, edited the Cancer Medicine Textbook. He had one of the longest continuous funding levels, as well as one of the highest levels of funding from the NCI. He served as president of the Society of Surgical Oncology, the World Federation of Surgical Oncology Societies, and the International Sentinel Node Society, and mentored more than 150 postdoctoral fellows in translational research associated with surgical treatment of cancer throughout his career.

Morton has received numerous recognition awards for surgery. The American College of Surgeons (ACS) recognized Morton’s contribution to the field of surgery related to his technique of sentinel lymph node biopsy with the Jacobson Innovation Award of the ACS in 2008.

“Don Morton was a legend in surgical oncology, an icon as a surgical investigator, a pioneer in melanoma research, a valued mentor and educator, an authentic role model, and a cherished
friend to so many around the world. His legacy will live on forever.” – Dave Hoon, Ph.D., John Wayne Cancer Institute