Denton Cooley is best known for performing the first implantation of an artificial heart. He was born on 22nd August 1920 in Houston, Texas. His father was a dentist. In school he was good in his studies and excelled in sports, especially in tennis and basketball. He majored in zoology at the University of Texas and after his premedical studies he entered the Texas College of Medicine at Galveston. Later on he joined Johns Hopkins in Baltimore. He was inducted into the Army Speciality Training Programme and obtained his M.D. in 1944. He assisted Dr. Blalock in the first "Blue Baby" operation and became interested in cardiac surgery.

In 1946 he was drafted into the army and served as chief of surgical services at the station hospital in Linz, Austria. On his discharge in 1948, with the rank of Captain, he returned to Hopkins. He went to London in 1950 to work with Lord Russell Brock.

Returning to Houston in 1951 he became associate professor of surgery at Baylor University College of Medicine. He also joined the Methodist Hospital there. At these institutions he became a collaborator with Dr. Michael DeBakey.

Their collaboration produced a lot of innovations in surgery. While working there he devised a method of removing aortic aneurysms. However, due to a clash of personalities and due to his stealing DeBakey’s thunder while the latter was away the two parted bitterly and Cooley joined the St. Luke’s Hospital. Paradoxically, this was just across the road from Methodist!! He continued teaching at Baylor and joined the Texas Children’s Hospital.

In the 1960s he had performed numerous bloodless open-heart surgeries on Jehovah’s Witnesses patients. The latter’s religions does not allow blood transfusions.

He continued his pioneering work on operating on congenital heart defects and also was the first to remove pulmonary emboli. He also worked on valve transplants. Due to his work the mortality in valve transplant operations fell from 70% to 8%!

To recognise his work the International Surgical Society bestowed its highest honour, the Renee Lebiche Prize on him in 1967.

In that year Christian Barnard had performed the first human heart transplant and this interested Cooley greatly and he set about perfecting the procedure resulting in his first transplant in May 1968. He transplanted the heart of a 15 year old girl into a 47 year old man who survived for 204 days. Inspired by his success he performed 22 transplants in the coming year. He did come into a lot of criticism by his rivals who claimed that brain death did not merit the removal of a beating heart from the donor. Hence, in 1969 with no donor heart available for a patient he implanted an experimental artificial heart. While this kept the patient alive he managed to get a human heart to replace the artificial one. Unfortunately, the patient died the next day. Dr. Cooley was sued by the patient’s widow but she was unsuccessful. Cooley was also roundly censured by his colleagues.

He now diverted his attention to coronary bypass surgery and by 1972 had performed nearly 1200 such procedures. Also, his open heart surgeries had risen to nearly 10,000!

In 1972 surgeons trained by him formed the Denton A. Cooley Cardiovascular Surgical Foundation and saw the dedication of the Texas Heart Institute in Houston.

He filed for bankruptcy in 1988 citing real estate debts.

In 2007 he and Dr. DeBakey made up.

He had a lot of honours bestowed on him. President Ronald Reagan bestowed the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1984 and President Bill Clinton bestowed the National Medal of Technology in 1998.

He has authored more than 1300 scientific papers and 13 books. He is married and has five daughters. He spends his spare time playing golf and upright bass with an all-physicians band.