Editorial: In Defense of Historians

Conrad R. Lam
In Defense of Historians

The announcement of a national or regional medical meeting is usually accompanied by an invitation for the members to submit abstracts of papers for consideration by the program committee. Sometimes in a condescending tone the invitation states that historical papers will be considered, i.e., will not be rejected automatically. This issue of the Henry Ford Hospital Medical Journal has gone to the other extreme by publishing an issue in which historical papers are in the forefront. No doubt the Editorial Board found it convenient to publish as a group a number of worthy papers that did not seem to fit into the format of the regular issues.

One longtime friend of the hospital who would probably not have applauded our historical issue was the late Charles F. (Boss) Kettering, inventor of the self-starter and Vice President in charge of Research for the General Motors Corporation. Because of his great personal friendship with Dr. Roy McClure, Surgeon-in-Chief, he was a frequent visitor for lunch, and he regaled us doctors with his ideas about research. I have heard him say many times, “Research is giving the accidental a chance to happen,” but he was especially fond of saying, “I am interested in the future, because that is where I expect to spend the rest of my life.” In common with other geniuses, he had little use for the records of the past, replete with errors. But geniuses are in the minority, so history will continue to be written. Maybe historians would not need so much defense if they adhered to the advice on some coffee cups in the Archives of the Henry Ford Hospital: “Historians tell it like it was.” I believe that Winston Churchill did just that when he left us the legacy of The History of the English Speaking People and the volumes on the history of World War II.

The historical articles in this issue are obviously not clinical papers, and physicians reading them need not expect to have their expertise improved. But they might enjoy reading Beierwaltes’ description of how collecting medical toys has made more realistic the history of the medical aspects of the Napoleonic wars and other conflicts. Richmond Smith has shared with us his pleasure in reading Dr. Frank Sladen’s copy of Cushing’s Life of Sir William Osler with its numerous notes in pencil in the margins. Steinhauer has told us more about Frank Sladen, the first Physician-in-Chief of the Henry Ford Hospital, and has included a thumbnail sketch of the early history of the hospital. Howard Markel, a medical student from the University of Michigan taking his clinical rotation on the medical service of the Henry Ford Hospital, has given some excellent rebuttal against the purists who urge us to drop eponyms such as the “Pickwickian syndrome.” Jeanne Riddle’s study of ancient specimens was interesting reading for me. My reason for writing the “Strange Story of Jay McLean, the Discoverer of Heparin” was because if I had not done it, it would never have been done.

The defense rests.

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Instructions for Authors*

Henry Ford Hospital Medical Journal

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Manuscripts will be reviewed for possible publication with the understanding that they are being submitted to one journal at a time and have not been published, simultaneously submitted, or already accepted for publication elsewhere. This does not preclude consideration of a manuscript that has been rejected by another journal or of a complete report that follows publication of preliminary findings elsewhere, usually as an abstract.

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