Dr. Louise Eisenhardt

Editor of the Journal of Neurosurgery, 1944–1965

The neurosurgical world was saddened by the death of Dr. Louise Eisenhardt on January 22, 1967. Thus ended an epoch of devoted service to neurosurgery, neuropathology, and the editorial art. Hers was indeed a lifetime of uncompromising excellence, patterned after her beloved chief, Harvey Cushing.

Louise Eisenhardt was born in Ramsey, New Jersey, daughter of the late Albert and Ella Knoll Eisenhardt. In 1915, at a remarkably early age, this talented young woman entered Dr. Cushing’s office as an editorial assistant and soon began to work on the material for Cushing’s book, *Tumors of the Nervus Acusticus*. Dr. Cushing left for military duty in France in May, 1917, and the young editor finished the job. The following acknowledgment appears in the preface:

To my secretary, Miss Louise Eisenhardt, whose assistance has been invaluable during the preparation of this monograph, I must leave the task of preparing the index and seeing the book through the press.

After the war, Cushing’s interest in intracranial tumors became more intense, and a kindred enthusiasm developed in his office co-worker. She decided at this time to gain a
medical education. She entered Tufts Medical School and accomplished the almost unbelievable task of studying medicine while continuing part of her previous editorial responsibilities. In 1922 she began to keep a cumulative log of operative results on various types of intracranial tumors. She was graduated in 1925 with the highest record ever attained at Tufts Medical School.

Dr. Eisenhardt had planned to take her internship at the New Haven Hospital, but, at Dr. Cushing’s request, she changed to the Boston Hospital for Women and Children. Soon editorial and statistical duties were interspersed between Obstetrics, Pediatrics, and other clinical responsibilities. The statistics of Cushing’s rapidly expanding series of intracranial tumors were kept in a little black book which few saw and none but Dr. Eisenhardt touched. This book became an item of great mystery around the Brigham and was referred to by Dr. Cushing in his 70th birthday address before the Harvey Cushing Society:

“Since I have never been good at tables and graphs and calculations of percentages, the task would have been impossible had it not been for a mysterious little black book in which day by day and year by year Louise had neatly and methodically entered every tumor as soon as it was histologically classified. While you were discussing head injuries this afternoon, I secretly removed it from her desk and shall pass it around as Exhibit A, so that you can see for yourselves how she knew when the 2000th tumor mark was reached, and much else beside. As I have never ventured to handle the object before myself, I trust you will treat it tenderly . . .”

Shortly after her internship, she was asked to accept a new responsibility. Dr. Percival Bailey, who had developed the section of Neuropathology at the Brigham, accepted the chair of Neurology and Neurosurgery at the new Medical School of the University of Chicago. What was more natural than for Louise to succeed him as neuropathologist to Dr. Cushing? This she did, and with such effectiveness that she became the outstanding authority in the world on the subject of intracranial tumors. During the interval 1928–30, she was co-author with Cushing of three papers concerning neuropathology. One described the use of supravital staining of fresh tissue in the diagnosis of intracranial tumors. Cushing placed great importance upon the immediate results obtained by this technique, and used to hold his operating room staff in a state of high expectancy until Louise quietly opened the door and announced the verdict. No doubt this method will be rediscovered in another generation.

Another paper, in 1929, on operative mortality in a series of intracranial tumors, indicated that she was still keeping the little black book for Harvey Cushing. Somehow she was able to find time to give the course on neuropathology at Tufts, a custom she continued for many years after she was transplanted from Harvard to Yale with H. C.

The retirement of Dr. Cushing from the Brigham Hospital in 1932 marked the end of one era and the beginning of another, the organization of the Harvey Cushing Society. The former brought to a sudden halt an inexhaustible stream of patients from all over the world. The latter began inauspiciously in the operating room of the Brigham Hospital on the morning of May 6, 1932, where 21 future members gathered together, most of them being rather unsure of what was going to happen next, but all feeling more secure because of the presence of Louise. I wonder if her intuition whispered to her how closely she would be identified with the budding Society through the years to come, as secretary-treasurer, 1934–38; president, 1938–39; secretary-treasurer, 1939–52; historian since 1952.

Dr. Cushing moved to New Haven in the fall of 1933, accepting the chair of Sterling Professor of Neurology at Yale. Louise stayed on in Boston, supervising the assembly of the future Brain Tumor Registry, amounting to about 3000 intracranial tumors and 50,000 photographed sheets of clinical records. As noted in John Fulton’s biography of Harvey Cushing: Louise Eisenhardt arrived in New Haven with the Brain Tumor Registry specimens in September, 1934. The registry became a new responsibility for Louise, who pursued a never-ending follow-up study of Dr. Cushing’s patients. She introduced the registry to the Harvey Cushing Society at the 1935 meeting in New Haven, and presented some of the results that same year to a meeting of the Association for Research in Nervous and Mental Diseases, in a paper on long-term postoperative survival.
The meningioma monograph then came into sharp focus. Cushing’s interest in these challenging neoplasms was intense, yet he barely included them in his notes on intracranial tumors at the First International Neurological Congress in 1938, stating that a complete report on the meningiomas was in the course of preparation. In regard to this, he remarked in his 70th birthday address to the Harvey Cushing Society:

“Nothing is so devastating to one’s peace of mind as a promissory note left unpaid. This particular promise rested uneasily on my conscience until 6 years later when, recalling Dr. Johnson’s adage that he who runs against time has an adversary not subject to casualties, I pulled myself together and spent the better part of 12 months completing its composition while Dr. Eisenhardt labored over the histological chapter and the statistical tables. How she may have regarded this dual responsibility was never revealed, but I personally looked on the work as my swan song and felt that so long as this Club carried my name, it would never do to let you down by tailing off with something second-rate.”

The work continued into February, 1938, when the completed manuscript was dispatched to the Banta Publishing Company. After much proofreading and consultation, the first copy of the final monograph was presented to Dr. Cushing on September 3, 1938. The occasion was celebrated at a tea party with Louise and her mother that very day.

Somehow, Drs. Cushing and Eisenhardt found time for a final paper in 1938, a historical note on Durante’s removal of a meningioma in 1884. As April 8, 1939, approached there was a great flurry of activity in association with the New Haven meeting of the Harvey Cushing Society and the 70th birthday celebration at the Lawn Club. When the great evening arrived, Louise was the lovely, gracious president and toastmistress, seated at the speakers’ table between Dr. Cushing and Dean Bayne-Jones of the Yale School of Medicine. Across the years we can still recapture something of the spirit and excitement of that occasion from Dr. Eisenhardt’s opening remarks:

“Dr. Cushing, fellow members, and guests: It is a great pleasure to bid you welcome on this joyous occasion. We have been eagerly looking forward to the evening of April 8th, and during these past several days a feeling of extraordinary excitement has been in the air. Messages of all kinds, letters, cables,
telegrams, gifts, pouring in from near and from afar, have been surreptitiously waylaid and concealed. I think that Dr. Cushing must have been somewhat aware of the mysterious slimmness of the mail that came over his desk, usually piled high at this time of the year. But at last the moment has come when we may bring forth from their secret places these many tributes to the one we are here gathered to honor. The glowing candle lights on the birthday cake have just been blown out while a good wish went forth from the heart of each and every one of us.

“To our beloved Chief, may I extend from the Society that bears his name felicitations and affectionate greetings on this, his seventieth birthday. Dr. Cushing, Happy Birthday!”

Dr. Cushing later completed his playful remarks about Louise and the little black book:

“Had it not been for this confounded little book which she was prone to consult at awkward moments, the operative and case mortality percentages for the meningiomas would have been found much lower and the end results much better. For had I been left to myself, the temptation to exclude a case here and there to improve the figures would have been irresistible. But you can’t cheat in your own favor when someone else checks the record. The moral is never try to keep your own score if you want to be trusted by others.”

He concluded his remarks in a more solemn vein with the following quotation from the Talmud: The day is short and work is great. The reward is also great and the Master praises. It is not incumbent on thee to complete the work but thou must not therefore cease from it.

In 1943 the Harvey Cushing Society, with the financial guarantee of John Fulton, established the Journal of Neurosurgery. They could hardly have realized how fortunate they were in having a person of Dr. Eisenhardt’s capabilities, ready and willing to accept the responsibility of managing editor. She was a perfect combination of the science of her profession and the editor’s art. The first number came off the Banta Press, under the imprinture of Charles C Thomas, in January, 1944. It is unlikely that any journal has had such editorial excellence for such a long period. Be it bibliographic errors or split infinitives, Louise hunted them down and eradicated them.

The year 1965 marked her retirement from the editorship. It was also the golden anniversary of her association with Dr. Cushing and her 33rd anniversary with the Society which proudly carries his name. She was accorded the honor of giving the first Harvey Cushing Oration at the meeting of the Society, including presentation of a medal. Those who were present will never forget her graceful, spontaneous reminiscences of Harvey Cushing. The March 1965 issue of the Journal of Neurosurgery was also dedicated to her. Her health, already failing, became very poor in 1966, requiring prolonged hospitalization. She improved temporarily and went to the home of her sister, Mrs. Albert N. Dangerfield, in Rockport, Mass. It was there that she died in her sleep, as had her brother Paul several weeks earlier.

Any tribute to Louise Eisenhardt would be incomplete without mention of her special ability and accomplishments in the field of teaching. From 1946 until her promotion to emeritus status at Yale, a host of young neurosurgeons and neuropathologists came to her laboratory to study the pathology of intracranial neoplasms. In the beginning (1946) there were still about 800 of Dr. Cushing’s tumor patients known to be living, and her laboratory was a very lively place, with follow-up reports, checking the old slides and records, working out diagnoses on the new Yale cases. I suspect that this may have been one of the happiest times in Louise’s life. In 1959, a group of her former pupils gathered at a meeting of the Congress of Neurological Surgeons, in what might have been called the Louise Eisenhardt Alumni Association. She had just completed a seminar on the pathology of intracranial tumors. The group honored her at a special luncheon, and arrangements were made for her portrait to be painted by Deane Keller of Yale. It now hangs near the entrance to the Pathology Building, where she worked for many years.

This tribute is intended to honor one who has, for such a long time, honored us by her association with us. To our dear Louise! Hail and Farewell.

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