Obituary
MAX MINOR PEET
1885–1949

The death of Max Minor Peet on March 25, 1949 was a rude shock to his many friends. He had felt ill that morning, but in spite of this he did not shorten his eight o’clock lecture to the Junior students. Death came suddenly an hour later from coronary thrombosis.

Doctor Peet was such a youthful, vital person that it did not seem possible that he was sixty-three. He was born in Iosco, Michigan, October 20, 1885 and was the son of Lafayette and Eunice Ann Peet. He received his A.B. degree from the University of Michigan in 1908 and an M.A. and M.D. degree in 1910.
He early showed promise in the field of science while attending high school in Ypsilanti. An ornithology contest for college students was being held at the nearby University of Michigan. The budding ornithologist asked if a high school student might enter the competition, and upon receiving permission, proceeded to win first prize. This was an original and very beautiful Audubon print.

Doctor Peet went on to win world fame as an ornithologist. His first scientific publication written in 1905 was entitled "Observations on the Nesting Habits of a Pair of House Wrens." He started collecting bird specimens early. As late as 1932 he was sent by the University to the Chisos Mountains in Texas to collect. He was a crack wing shot, as was his father before him, and he succeeded in bringing back a number of specimens of the White Throated Swift, the fastest flying bird in the United States.

He claimed that any proficiency that he acquired in surgery started with the preparation of Hummingbird skins, a most difficult technical procedure. The specimens he prepared with his own hands were second to none. His ability to prepare specimens of day-old nesting House Wrens, Blackbirds, and the like was probably unique. The delicacy of the baby birds makes them exceedingly difficult to skin. Probably no one else ever mastered this particular technique so perfectly.

Doctor Peet was one of the early discoverers of the nesting places of the rare Kirtland Warbler. From a description given him by a rural mail carrier he believed that this bird, which nests only in Michigan, had been seen near Rosecommon. While he was driving in a horse-drawn buggy he heard a song he had never heard before. He thought that this must be the Kirtland Warbler, which proved to be the case. Some of the specimens he took at this time are in the Smithsonian Institute and the American Museum of Natural History.

His own collection of birds numbered approximately 15,000 and was probably the largest private collection in the country. He was interested in obtaining a completely representative collection of American birds found north of the Rio Grande; this entails 1400 species and sub-species. There still remained a few gaps to be filled and he was constantly in touch with field ornithologists to fill these. There was scarcely an ornithologist in the country who had not at one time or another borrowed from the Peet Collection. At the time of his death he was engaged in an x-ray study of the skulls of the two kinds of Golden-eye Duck in an attempt to identify these birds finally, on a basis of skull structure rather than plumage. This original method had already created a great deal of interest though it had not yet been published.

In spite of his active interest in Natural History both before and after entering medical school, he had always planned to become a surgeon. His surgical career began with an internship at Rhode Island General Hospital. After two years he went to the University of Pennsylvania as Robert Robinson Porter Fellow in Research Medicine. He was assistant chief surgeon at the Philadelphia General Hospital from 1914 to 1916. At this time he did a number of experimental Eck fistulae. With Doctor Charles H. Frazier, by whom he was trained, he probably attempted the first Eck fistula on the human.

In 1916 he returned to the University of Michigan as Instructor in Surgery. What little neurosurgery there was, he did. It was only later, however, when Doctor Hugh Cabot came on as Professor of Surgery in 1919 that he began to specialize. He continued to do some general surgery until 1926, when he reluctantly gave it up. He became Professor of Surgery in charge of the Division of Neurosurgery in 1930.

In 1925 he introduced hypertonic glucose for the control of increased intracranial
pressure. In 1926 he published the first large series of antero-lateral cordotomies. He was the first to operate for subdural hematoma in infants.

He early became famous for his technique in the operation for tic douloureux which he had learned from Doctor Frazier. About 1930 a group of plastic surgeons met in Ann Arbor. Some of them went in to watch Doctor Peet operate for tic douloureux by the temporal route. Doctor Vilray Blair, unknown to the operator, timed him with a stop watch—seven minutes from the skin incision to exposure of the sensory root. He did over a thousand of these operations during his lifetime. He once did four of them between 9:00 A.M. and 1:00 P.M., using the same table and local anesthesia in each case. It has been said that Dandy was the greatest expert on the surgery of the posterior fossa. The same might be said of Peet for the middle fossa.

Doctor Peet was best known for his work on hypertension. The evolution of the operation here is an interesting story. A patient with the gastric crises of tabes had failed to respond to cordotomy. It was thought that cutting the splanchnic nerves might relieve the pain. The operation was worked out on a cadaver. In February, 1929 the splanchnic nerves were divided and part of the dorsal sympathetic chain excised. The procedure was carried out bilaterally through an extra-pleural, supradiaphragmatic approach. The operation was unsuccessful but paved the way for later work. The operation had been performed only once before, as far as is known, by Otfrid Foerster of Breslau, also for gastric crises. It escaped notice as it was only mentioned in a book on pain written in German. Pieri had published a similar anatomical approach in 1927 but he did not perform the operation until June, 1929 when he performed a unilateral splanchnic section for gastric atony.

The first splanchnic section for hypertension at the University Hospital was done in November, 1933. The patient had been sent to Doctor Peet as probably suffering from brain tumor because of the presence of four diopters of papilledema and rapidly failing vision. His blood pressure on entrance was 270/150. It was only after a period of study that it became certain that this was not a brain tumor, since the syndrome of malignant hypertension was not clearly delineated at this time. The operation was fortunately a success and the patient lived a normal existence for over ten years. He performed this operation bilaterally over eighteen hundred times.

Doctor Peet was a member of many societies. These included the American Neurological, the American Surgical Association, and the Harvey Cushing Society. He was an honorary member of many others. His favorite society, however, was the Society of Neurological Surgeons to which he was elected in 1922 and of which he was president in 1935. He was rarely absent from one of their meetings. He was intensely loyal to his friends in this small society, and was proud of their achievements.

At the time of his death he was chairman of the American Board of Neurological Surgery. He had been a member of the general advisory committee of the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis for some years. He participated in the work of the National Foundation from its inception. It was a striking coincidence that because of his interest in infantile paralysis it was he who obtained the material from which the Lansing strain of poliomyelitis was isolated. This was the first strain that was shown to be adaptable to cotton rats and mice by Doctor Charles B. Armstrong of the National Institute of Health.

Doctor Peet married Grace Stewart Tait in 1915. Their devotion to each other and to their children was a wonderful thing to see. Many neurosurgeons from here and abroad knew the disarming hospitality of their household.
Perhaps the outstanding characteristic of Doctor Peet was his informality and infectious good humor. Affectation was left out of his make-up. He was so secure in himself that he did not know the meaning of jealousy.

An excerpt from a letter received from a girl he had operated upon some years before sums up the man: "I have always wondered at his kindnesses down the years and have felt it a privilege to be even remembered. I shall never forget his always having time to see me and listen, nor his interest in my husband and child. Of the many contributions he made, not the least was his graciousness and kindness to the little people."

Edgar A. Kahn, M.D.