Historical Vignette

Barnes Hospital and the Washington University Medical Center

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The author documents the development of the Medical School at Washington University since 1891, when the St. Louis Medical College was first included as part of the University. In 1909, Robert Brookings, President of the Corporation of Washington University, acquired a large endowment and moved the clinical and hospital facilities to a new location, enabled by the estate of Robert Barnes. Harvey Cushing was offered the chair of surgery but eventually decided in favor of Harvard University in 1910. Dr. Ernest Sachs was recruited to Washington University by Dr. Fred Murphy, and in 1919 became the first ever Professor of Neurological Surgery. The history of neurosurgery and those who served it at the Washington University Medical Center and Barnes Hospital is recounted.

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The 1880's saw the gradual, at times painful, emergence of a new era in medical education, with the medical schools at Harvard, Michigan, and Pennsylvania Universities beginning to introduce both the laboratory and clerkship aspects of medicine into the curriculum. Progressive medical education flourished, with new developments such as the opening of the Johns Hopkins Hospital in 1889 and the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine in 1893. A medical department was established at Washington University in 1891, with the inclusion of the St. Louis Medical College (founded in 1842). In 1899, the Missouri Medical College (founded in 1840) joined the University. Initially a proprietary school dependent for income upon student fees, the medical school became a full University department in 1906.

Growing national awareness of deficiencies in medical education triggered Abraham Flexner's report in 1910 to the Carnegie Foundation, which came to the attention of Robert Brookings, President of the Corporation of Washington University. Convinced of the existing defects, Brookings, with the support of wealthy St. Louis citizens, proceeded to acquire an impressive endowment along with what was to become an even more impressive facility. Helped and abetted by William Henry Welch, who had done so much in setting the course for Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, Brookings was able to recruit George Dock (a devotee of Sir William Osler) as professor of medicine, Eugene Opie and Joseph Erlanger (both Hopkins products) in pathology and physiology, John Howland (also of Hopkins) in pediatrics, and Philip Shaffer (a pupil of Otto Folin) in physiological chemistry. Robert Terry in anatomy was the only pre-reorganization professor who was retained as a department head. Through influential members of the University Corporation, ambitious plans were set afoot to abandon the totally inadequate downtown clinical and hospital facilities in favor of a newly constructed suitably up-to-date hospital (enabled by the estate of Robert Barnes) as well as a new Children's Hospital at the western edge of the city adjacent to Forest Park. Harvey Cushing was offered the chair of surgery at Washington University, but after a good deal of communication and vacillation, he decided in favor of Harvard in May, 1910, after being assured of the construction of the Peter Bent Brigham Hospital.

To turn our chronology back just a few years: Ernest Sachs graduated from the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine in 1904. He showed early interest in the nervous system and, after general surgical training with Arpad Gerster, abetted by his distinguished neurologist uncle, Bernard Sachs, and with the recommendation of Dr. Cushing, he spent 2 years abroad working with Sir Victor Horsley. While there, Sachs received word from Cushing that William Halsted had given him
permission to take on a full-time assistant in neurosurgery. The job was offered to Sachs but could not be accepted because he was committed to completing his tour with Horsley and his work on the thalamus. Cushing could not defer the appointment for an additional 3 months. At this point it is interesting to contemplate the whims of fate and the variable speed of the wheel of fortune. What if Cushing had come to St. Louis? What if Sachs had joined Cushing in Baltimore or Boston? In the letter of invitation to Sachs (dated June 18, 1908), Cushing also mentioned that “you may perhaps have heard that Mr. Phipps has given us a large sum of money for a psychiatric institute where our neurological clinical work is to be in all probability centered.” (This hope for a neurological “institute” was to recur in Cushing’s thoughts after World War I, and to engage Sachs’ dreams after World War II as well.)

In 1910, following Cushing’s disappointing decision, the positions of chair of surgery at Washington University and chief at the newly planned Barnes and Children’s Hospitals were filled by Fred T. Murphy. Three years younger than Cushing, he too was a star athlete at Yale University before going on to Harvard Medical School and Massachusetts General Hospital. He recruited an outstanding cast of talented characters including Barney Brooks, Nathaniel Allison in orthopedics, Vilray Blair in plastic surgery, John Caulik in urologic surgery, and Ernest Sachs. The latter was expected to develop neurosurgery in the area where “no one south of Chicago had attempted to enter the field. Allen Kanavel and Dean Lewis were doing some neurosurgery in that city, but neither devoted himself to this exclusively.”

Along with a steadily growing neurosurgical practice, Sachs taught a course in animal surgery and conducted a legendary general diagnostic clinic on Thursdays at noon which remained popular with students for 35 years. The latter was performed in a rather crowded amphitheater, with an indiscriminantly selected student invited to come down in the “pit” with the professor and his patient. Despite vigorous activity (he loved climbing in the Adirondacks), Dr. Sachs had a rather prominent embonpoint and the course of quizzing the hapless student was described by reminiscing and admiring alumni as “butting the students in the bullpen.”

With the completion of the new facilities in 1914 (Fig. 1), there was smooth sailing until World War I. Dr. Murphy had organized and served as commanding officer of Base Hospital No. 21, which was called to serve in France in April, 1917, taking with it a large number of Barnes Hospital staff members. Dr. Sachs was kept in St. Louis and, in addition to his already heavy neurosurgical practice, took on the load of acting chief and professor of surgery, helped by one house officer and some senior students who were being rushed through in 3 years. At the request of Surgeon General Gorgas, three schools were established (in St. Louis, Chicago, and New York) where young general surgeons were sent for 6 weeks of instruction in the neurological diagnosis and treatment of head injuries prior to assignment overseas.

On returning from the war in 1919, Murphy announced his retirement from surgery to become administrator of the Murphy Family Trust and manager of the family’s extensive holdings in Michigan. The position of full-time chairmanship of surgery was offered to and accepted by Evarts Graham, just completing his military service on the Empyema Commission. Dr.
Sachs' title changed from Acting Professor of Surgery to Professor of Neurological Surgery, the first professorship in the world in the burgeoning specialty which he ornamented and to which he contributed so much (Fig. 2). In 1919, Cushing suggested the desirability of getting together with other men interested in the field, and the first meeting of the Society of Neurological Surgeons was held at the Brigham Hospital in 1920. Cushing was elected the first president and Sachs was made secretary, a position he held for the Society's first 11 meetings. He was elected president of the Society in 1925.

In 1921, Sachs established a fellowship program at Washington University and took pride in the achievements of his trainees as they assumed important positions in neurosurgery around the country as well as abroad. He was recognized as one of the pioneers in the field, and was an original member of the American Board of Neurological Surgery in 1940 and president of the American Neurological Association in 1943. Early relations with faculty colleagues in neurology (Sidney Schwab) and basic science (Joseph Erlanger) were friendly. Major efforts to establish an Institute escaped his grasp, but ever closer relations between younger individuals resulted in numerous significant collaborative basic science reports. A conjoint Department of Neuropsychiatry came into being in 1938, with David Riech, John Whitehorn, and Carlisle Jacobsen added to the faculty. The interruption of World War II saw more changes, with the assumption of that department's headship by Edwin Gildea. At war's end, Dr. Sachs retired as chief of neurosurgery and was succeeded by Henry Schwartz after the latter's return from World War II in 1946. With James O'Leary returning as Professor of Neurology (in the combined Department of Neuropsychiatry) and the persisting remarkable talent of George Bishop, the role of neurosurgery in joint projects was further enhanced.

In July, 1963, an independent Department of Neurology was officially designated, with Dr. O'Leary as chief. When O'Leary reached administrative retiring age, William Landau was appointed head of Neurology in July, 1970. At that point, in addition to maintaining his faculty appointment as Professor of Neurology, O'Leary was made Professor of Experimental Neurological Surgery. Neurosurgery's position as a division of surgery continued to be a satisfactory one through the administrations of Evarts Graham and (later) Carl Moyer and Walter Ballinger, and nothing could disturb the close ties established with the other disciplines. After 28 years as chief of neurosurgery (2 years of which, 1965 to 1967, were spent as Acting Head of Surgery), Schwartz retired from his administrative post. At that juncture it was deemed desirable to create a Department of Neurology and Neurological Surgery, jointly administered by William Landau and Sidney Goldring. That venture has been a successful collaboration, providing even closer ties with basic neuroscience without increased strain on the cords that continue to bind us to surgery. Further passage of time has seen the administrative retirement of Goldring, being succeeded by Ralph Dacey, and Landau, whose successor is Dennis Choi. Meanwhile, the Washington University Medical Center and Barnes Hospital have undergone notable changes in size and appearance, but still perform as centers of excellence in patient care, graduate and undergraduate education, and research. They look with confidence to continuing a leading role in neuroscience.

References


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