Obituary

WILLIAM PERRINE VAN WAGENEN
1897-1961

As the old orders change, making way for new, certain pillars of progress remain boldly in place. One of these, in the field of neurological surgery, is Dr. William P. Van Wagenen, who has gained the lasting respect of those who have known him or have known of him. For a person enjoying apparent robust health in retirement, his death from acute hemorrhagic pancreatitis, on August 7, 1961 came suddenly and has left a feeling of shock and great loss.

Born on May 24, 1897, at Nunda, New York, Van Wagenen moved at an early age with his parents to a farm at Worcester, New York, near the folklore habitat of James Fenimore Cooper. This rural existence, with parental persuasion, might have inclined the young man to take over the family farm. However, science classes of high school activated an inner ferment, bringing recognition from the school principal and encouragement to try for a New York State College scholarship. Success in this competition gave the basis for the big move to Cornell and the continued series of events leading to training with Dr. Harvey Cushing, and eventually a prominent place in the new world of neurosurgery. Those early rural years apparently established a lasting friendship for "those who till the soil" and the patients of Dr. Van Wagenen who came from the farm always enjoyed an extra bit of conversation, with sympathy and understanding.

After enrollment in Cornell University, even with help in tuition, living expenses had to be met with extra work. Graduation from Cornell in 1918 was followed by a brief interval of military serv-
ie. With the war period ended, the next move was to medical school at Harvard University. Here again, the program included diligent application for self-support leading to the medical degree in June, 1922. Postgraduate training began with internship at the Memorial Hospital in New York City and the Peter Bent Brigham Hospital in Boston, Massachusetts. Following a residency in the surgical service at the Memorial Hospital in New York, Dr. Van Wagenen returned to Boston in December, 1925 to serve as resident with Dr. Harvey Cushing in neurosurgery at the Peter Bent Brigham Hospital. Subsequent training included residency service at the Rochester General Hospital and a fellowship in Munich, Germany. In July, 1928, Dr. Van Wagenen began his appointment, as Assistant Professor in Neurosurgery, Chief of the Neurosurgical Service, at the new medical school, University of Rochester, Rochester, New York. This began an active interval in clinical and investigative neurological surgery, including setting up a residency program for training others in the art learned from the master, Harvey Cushing.

There seems to be some lack of information concerning how Dr. Cushing selected his chief residents and the times of their appointments. From the archives of Dr. Van Wagenen, we do have an interesting letter written to him by Dr. Cushing on August 19, 1924 while Dr. Van Wagenen was serving as surgical resident at the Memorial Hospital. A portion is quoted as follows: "I have just gotten back from abroad and find your July 2 letter. What are your plans? Have you decided on anything? I do not know quite how long Dr. Putnam plans to be here, but wonder if it would not be a good thing for you to come on now if you are free and start work in the laboratory with Bailey, and therefore be on ground for a vacancy when one arises. Always sincerely yours, Harvey Cushing." This note promptly led to the move from the Memorial to Boston and Dr. Cushing had tapped another leader who would serve well in the ensuing years.

Investigative work came naturally to William P. Van Wagenen. At the Memorial Hospital in New York City, he worked with Dr. Jonathan Rhodes in outlining the origin of the meningioma from the arachnoidal cell. In the early days of the pros and cons of localizing brain tumors with or without air study, Van Wagenen reviewed the craniotomies at the Brigham and reported the accuracy of air studies in localizing cerebral lesions.

He had interest in devising surgical techniques for approaches to obscure portions of the cerebral anatomy. Resection of papillomas of the choroid plexus, and cysts of the third ventricle were reported in the literature. In the latter part of the '30s attention was directed to the surgical division of the corpus callosum for control of the spread of an epileptic seizure. This led to a fund of information on the corpus callosum and associated structures, even though no significant change was found in the spread of convulsive seizure.

Contributions were made by Dr. Van Wagenen in the surgical section of white-fiber pathways of the frontal lobe in relation to treatment of pain as well as in altering states of mental disorder. Injection of procaine into frontal-lobe white-fiber pathways as an indication of the effect of lobotomy was a precursor for injection techniques that have been used more recently for treating hyperkinetic disorders.

Many original ideas in neurosurgical technique have been contributed by Dr. Van Wagenen. An example would be the application of a silver clip to the surface of the dura mater, just before closure, either with an osteoplastic flap or after section of the trigeminal nerve root by the temporal approach. This clip would serve as a marker on a postoperative film of the skull in case there were a question of epidural hematoma. A letter from Dr. Harvey Cushing, dated August 16, 1934, provides approval as follows: "Your trick of putting a clip on the dura in case there is any question of formation of a clot is quite a new one to me, and excellent. Had I known of it, it might have saved many unnecessary re-evaluations and have expedited some that were really necessary."

The inspiration for a new neurosurgical society was shared with others in the early 1930s and led to the formation of The Harvey Cushing Society. Dr. Van Wagenen was elected to serve as its first president and maintained a keen interest in its affairs thereafter.

Another Van Wagenen idea of lasting significance, was a proposal to Dr. Harvey Cushing in 1931 for a registry of brain tumors. The suggestion received approval and support by Dr. Cushing, but, decisions regarding scope of the registry led to considerable delay in getting it organized. Dr. Van Wagenen was most delighted to have news of progress soon after Dr. Cushing's move to New Haven. This was stated in a letter from Dr. Cushing dated October 2, 1934, as follows: "Boston people were not wildly enthusiastic about the brain tumor registry and had difficulty finding a place where it could be quartered. It has finally seemed best to us to move the whole show down here and this we have done and Louise has come with it and is in charge." The continued importance of this brain tumor registry served as a great source of interest to Dr. Van Wagenen although he was not one to point out what an important role he had in its beginning. His was a quiet way of being effective.

With the outbreak of World War II, Dr. Van Wagenen was invited to head one of the original