

TULSA MEDICINE HISTORY

Charles J. Bate, M.D.

This is an excerpt from an interview with Dr. Bate conducted by Gerald E. Gustafson, M.D., Robert M. Shepard, Jr., M.D., and George W. Prothro, M.D., on February 19, 2003, as part of a project to collect and maintain an archive of the history of medicine in Tulsa.

On the evening of Monday, November 10, 1952, the membership of Tulsa County Medical Society met in executive session in the Ivory Room of the Mayo Hotel. The main order of business was a proposed amendment to the TCMS Bylaws creating a new membership category, "Scientific Membership." Following approval of the new classification, Dr. Berget H. Blockson motioned that Dr. Charles Bate be elected to scientific membership. The motion was seconded by Dr. Hays R. Yandell and approved by a majority at the meeting.

Robert M. Shepard, Jr., M.D., recalled, "there was one or two who were prepared to filibuster all night against the motion. The rest of us were prepared to stay. About midnight we finally voted."

The significance of the decision was displayed on the front page of the Tulsa World later that week, "Tulsa County Medical Society Admits First Negro Doctor in History."

Dr. Bate said, "that made the Negro newspapers all over the country. Some said they would run Dr. E. N. Lubin out of town for signing my application. He later became president of the medical society."

Before making headlines in Tulsa, Dr. Bate was born in 1914, in Castalian Springs, Tennessee. "There were seven doctors in my family. Two first cousins, an uncle, an aunt once removed and then there were two white doctors named Bate. One of them, Dr. Humphrey Bate, delivered me. He was one of the founders of the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville. He and my papa were close friends. Medicine just ran in the family. General Bate who was wounded at the battle of Shiloh was my grandfather's half brother. He became Governor of Tennessee and then United States Senator. He sent my father to school because in the battle of Shiloh there were eight members of the Bate family killed. My grandfather looked after the little white children. So, when the war was over and General Bate became Governor, he sent my grandfather's two kids to school. One of them was my father."

"Both my parents were teachers. My father was a history and high school math teacher and my mother taught grammar and Latin."

After graduating from Tennessee State, in 1934, Dr. Bate entered Meharry Medical College, one of the few Black Medical Colleges. "I graduated in 1938 and did 20 months of internship at Meharry."

"Dr. Haywood, wanted me to come to Oklahoma City. I didn't want him to have to support

me so I came to Tulsa on April 28, 1940, and started on my own. There were about 16 Negro doctors here then and I was the youngest and they opened their arms to me and welcomed me."

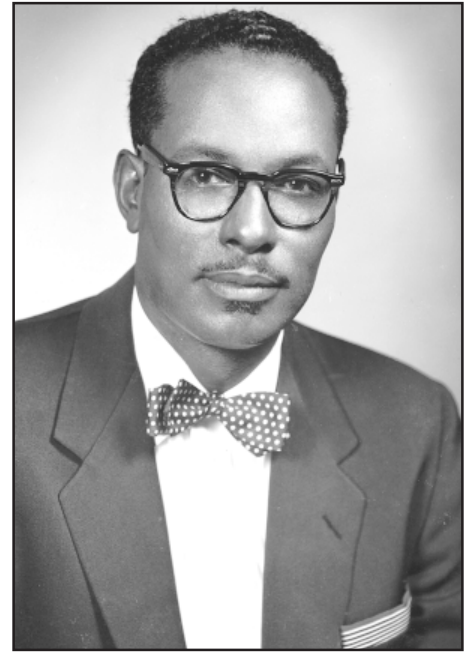
"One of the greatest things for me was meeting Dr. David Hudson, a urologist from Johns Hopkins who operated a government VD clinic in Tulsa.

I had a tremendous amount of experience giving injections and examining syphilis patients. Dr. Hudson needed someone to help him. He took me in and sometimes we would have 300 people twice a week to treat for syphilis."

"One evening I was called to see a man who had pneumonia. I put the man in the hospital and the next day I received a call from the Sinclair Oil Company. They wanted their chief surgeon, Dr. Frank Flack, to come out and see this patient because he was one of their employees. After Dr. Flack had seen the patient, he said 'I've read your history and this man has tuberculosis.' I said, 'no doctor, I don't think so. The man has unresolved pneumonia' and I then withdrew a quart of straw colored fluid from his chest and confirmed he had pneumonia. Dr. Flack said, 'how did you know?' and I said, 'I took his history and percussed his chest out.'"

After that, Dr. Flack kept track of the patient and eventually told Dr. Bate that the people at Sinclair were 'very pleased by the way he was looking after their man.'

"Dr. Flack then invited me to come see him operate at Moton Hospital. It was a hernia or something. When he finished he told the Negro doctor who was assisting that he had done a nice job and the doctor said 'thank you.' Dr. Flack then said, 'Dr. Bate, if you get a patient I'll help you operate.' I said 'no thank you Dr. Flack. Does that fel-



Dr. Bate in 1952

low really think he just operated? When I was an intern I used to close the abdomen and you only let him close the skin.'

Dr. Flack, who would become a close friend and mentor, said, "you really like to study don't you." I told him, yes that's all I have time to do. I can't play golf or go to the movies so I have to spend my time studying."

A week later a young Negro boy was examined by Dr. Bate and found to have a perforated gastric ulcer. Dr. Flack confirmed the diagnosis and said 'if we operate he might die and he's certainly going to die if we don't operate.' They operated and in 10 days he was up and about.

"Dr. Flack was a good anatomist. He was a great reader. He would have other doctors and me at his house for bull sessions and study and it got to where we were doing two or three surgeries together every week.

In 1943, Dr. Flack arranged for me and another doctor to go to Cook County Hospital in Chicago for a two-week course in gastrointestinal surgery. It was wonderful training by top surgeons. He also introduced me to other doctors like Dr. R.M. Shepard, Sr. and Dr. Leo Lowbeer."

The Oklahoma Medical, Dental and Pharmaceutical Association, which had been organized in 1908, held meetings in different towns to provide medical education opportunities for black physicians. "They had outstanding surgeons to come and lecture at the state meetings," said Dr. Bate. "We tried to learn as much as we could."

"One of the most rewarding experiences we ever had was working with Dr. Shepard, Dr. R.C. Bryant and Dr. W.N. Coots in a public health clinic about 20 feet by 15 feet, next to a chicken house. Dr. Shepard worked on TB patients, Dr. Bryant saw prenatal cases and Dr. Coots examined chest patients. At that time there was no such thing as pre-natal care. On Monday I would see as many as 40 or 50 babies.

This was before the advent of antibiotics, anti-tubercular drugs, free general medical clinics, birth control pills and ultrasound. Infant mortality was unbelievably high."

In 1941, Moton Hospital was established in the Tulsa Municipal Hospital building that had been constructed in 1932. A bi-racial Board of Trustees leased and modernized the building to 44 beds. It was named after Dr. Russ A. Moton, a renowned black educator at Tuskegee, Alabama.

In 1945 in response to the work being done at the free health clinic, the Variety Health Center was completed. "Moton received funds for the Variety Health Center for the work done by Negro and white doctors."

Dr. Bate's journey to membership in the medical society was long and not without difficulties. "I wrote up five surgical cases on ectopic pregnancy that I had done at Moton. In 1947, a well-known doctor came to town for a joint meeting of Hillcrest

and St. John staffs and Dr. Flack presented my cases at the meeting. The doctor asked where I was and he was told I couldn't come to the meeting because I was a Negro. The doctor asked those at the meeting, 'you mean we are discussing this doctor's cases and he is not even allowed to come to this meeting?' Dr. Leo Lowbeer stood up and said, 'this will never happen again.'

"No black doctor in his right mind would have asked for membership in Tulsa County Medical Society in those days. There was one regrettable incident in the 20's in which a medical society member invited black doctors to attend a lecture by an eminent physician and they all came and sat in the back of the room. A white physician got up and stretched a sheet in front of them. All except one politely got up and left. In 1921, the medical society did help by providing money and medical instruments to black physicians who lost everything in the race riot."

Dr. Bate said of his history, "there were things that happened that you just could hardly believe. But, I always understood that it just takes a little yeast to leaven a whole lot of bread. Dr. Flack and others encouraged white doctors to work with us and help us."

Mercy Hospital, which was owned by Dr. Wade Sisler, was the first hospital in Tulsa to integrate both patients and hospital staff. "Dr. Sisler was unselfish. He would come to Moton and help and he never turned anyone down. If you didn't have any money, well that was alright."

Black patients in all Tulsa hospitals except Moton and Mercy were segregated into black wards until the 1960's.

"If a Negro doctor sent a patient to see a white doctor in the Medical Arts Building, they had to come after 6 p.m."

In 1966, Dr. Bate established Operation Hope a program designed to help high school girls and high school drop-outs learn to be trained for office assistants and medical aides. "One night I was walking to a meeting of black doctors and a young girl stopped me to ask for a dollar. I said to her, 'why don't you get a job' and she said, 'if there was anything I could do I wouldn't beg.' Well, right then I decided to do something." The free course was detailed in a '**Medical Economics**,' article. Dr. Bate planned to train 20 students but 59 enrolled for the first course. The Red Cross provided speakers and local companies and churches offered help. At the end of the six month course, several of the students were employed in local hospitals.

In 1989, Dr. Bate published a book on the history of Oklahoma Black medical providers. The title of Dr. Bate's book is, "It's Been A Long Time And We've Come a Long Way."

That could also be said of Dr. Bate, who provided a positive influence for many black doctors who were to follow and he continues to show the way for all physicians regardless of color.