

TULSA MEDICINE HISTORY

ROBERT M. SHEPARD, JR., M.D.

This is an excerpt from an interview with Dr. Shepard conducted by Gerald E. Gustafson, M.D., and C.T. Thompson, M.D., on May 7, 2002, as part of a project to collect and maintain an archive of the history of medicine in Tulsa.

Of all the honors acquired over his 40 years of practicing medicine, Robert Shepard, Jr., M.D., counts as one of the most important the distinction he holds with his father – they are the only father and son to both serve as president of the Tulsa County Medical Society. “I was always sort of proud of that,” he said with a smile.

His father, Robert Shepard, Sr., M.D., served as president in 1935. Dr. Shepard, Jr., served as president in 1972. However, before either doctor could become a TCMS president, they had to overcome World Wars I and II, the depression and serious illness.

Dr. Shepard, Jr., was born “on a red clay farm” in Kemper County, in northeastern Mississippi. “My mother was down there with my father’s parents to have me. I was born there because he was overseas fighting World War I. Dad was born just a couple of miles from where I was born. He was one of six children. The others stayed on the farm but after he had chopped cotton for a few seasons he said to hell with that. He put himself through medical school. Thank God he did. If he hadn’t, I would have been chopping cotton. I was about 6 weeks old when he came back from the war and we moved to Oklahoma.”

Dr. Shepard Sr. had previously been in practice in Star, Oklahoma. He returned to Talahina to work at the Oklahoma Tuberculosis Sanitarium where he specialized in tuberculosis and eventually rose to become the superintendent of the Sanitarium. When Dr. Shepard Jr. was nine years old, his father accepted a position with the Valley View TB Sanitarium in Patterson, New Jersey. “They were just starting and he helped open the hospital and ran it for two years.”

Unfortunately, Dr. Shepard, Sr. then became ill. “He developed a pyogenic lung abscess from which he nearly died because in those days there was no treatment for lung abscess. He had to resign his position and he sent us back to Tulsa because he said if he ever got well he was going to practice in Tulsa because he liked the town.”

Dr. Shepard, Sr., spent a year at his parents farm in Mississippi undergoing an unusual treatment. “His treatment was iodine and milk – a teaspoon of iodine in a glass of milk and that was his therapy for a lung abscess - I guess they thought because the iodine was an antiseptic it would get in the blood and kill the bugs.”

His father recovered and opened his office in Tulsa in 1929, just in time for the depression. Dr. Shepard, Jr., was 11 years old. “His office was in the Medical Arts Building downtown along with everyone else. I got to know the doctors of those days from 1929 on from being in the Medical Arts Building with him. Many years later he showed me his books from those days.



His gross income from month to month would be \$280, \$240, then maybe a big month of \$300. On that gross income he ran an office, paid his secretary and supported a family.”

There wasn’t too much business for any of the physicians during that time. “One of the chief activities in the Medical Arts Building was a floating poker game in the library. Some of our most prominent doctors were members of that game. If anybody had a patient, his secretary would come up after him and he would go down and take care of the patient. Otherwise they would spend the day playing poker because there were not a whole lot of patients to come by in those days.” As the depression waned so did the poker game.

“Tulsa had a population of about 30,000 then. I remember hunting rabbits at Admiral and Yale and they had a golf course at 21st and Harvard – that was out in the country.”

In 1935, when he was 16, Dr. Shepard, Jr., started his career in medicine. “Mrs. McNulty at Morningside Hospital let me work as an orderly for the summer. Although she didn’t pay me anything I kept full hours and because I was working for free I spent a lot of time up in surgery watching the big surgeons of that day like Harry Murdock and Andre Carney. “They were a rough and ready bunch. In those days there were no privileges. Everybody could operate and everybody did. I watched the patients and helped take care of them. The hernia patients were kept in bed two full weeks before being allowed up. I must have given a thousand enemas that summer.”

Following that summer, Dr. Shepard began his



*Robert M. Shepard, Jr., M.D.
Served as TCMS president in 1972*

Pearl Harbor. By that time I had received a residency appointment in surgery and the army didn't let me finish my internship. On June 30, 1942, I walked out of the hospital and on July 1, I had a uniform on."

Dr. Shepard served as a flight surgeon in the Army Air Corps. "Flight surgery, of course, had very little to do with surgery. Mostly I just took care of the flyers and base personnel in the China-India-Burma Theater where I was, gave them their allotment of whiskey when they came back from their missions."

Following the war, Dr. Shepard returned to start his residency. "When I came back I had been out of medicine for four years and there was a very traumatic readjustment. The school, to its everlasting credit, held my residency for me. So, I completed it in general surgery at Charity Hospital in New Orleans on the LSU service."

Dr. Shepard returned to Tulsa in 1950. "I didn't know much about anything. I wrote to Howard Cohenour who had just opened an office and didn't have any business either. He invited me to share his office while we were getting started. We were up on the seventh floor with a waiting room in common with Drs. LeMaster and Armstrong. When Howard had a patient I would go down and get a cup of coffee and when I had a patient Howard would go get a cup of coffee."

In 1952, Drs. Harold White and Davy Garrett offered Dr. Shepard a partnership and formed Garrett, Shepard and White. "Harold White had come back two years before. We had been roommates all through medical school."

The polio epidemic of 1952 left an indelible impression on Dr. Shepard. "There was a polio ward on the first floor center of St. John's and another ward at Hillcrest. They would just line those young kids up in those iron lungs - I would do a tracheotomy on them and they would die the next day. It was pitiful. I watched my best friend, a girl I had grown up with, die in an iron lung. I did 63 tracheotomies that summer. For a

college and medical education. He attended the University of Oklahoma for his pre-medical education and he earned his medical degree from Tulane University in 1941. "The day I graduated from medical school, I received a reserve commission. That was in June of 1941. I started my internship in July and in December came

long time two of the iron lungs were kept in the attic of St. John. One of them had a plaque on it to Marjorie Anderson, my friend who died."

Dr. Shepard was one of the original incorporators of the Doctors Building at 21st and Lewis in which the medical society's offices have been since 1986. "Utica Square had not been built very long and it was pretty well filled and we were in the Medical Arts Building downtown and it was getting crowded. Originally, there were four of us, E.O. Johnson, Arnold Ungerman, Harold White and me. I was in charge of getting tenants. I remember guys walking the other way when they would see me coming. But, it was successful. We opened the building in 1959 with about 60 tenant stockholders and we never had problems with the landlord since that was us."

Of the many changes Dr. Shepard has witnessed in how medicine is practiced, the most dramatic have been in patient care, reimbursement and the philosophy of medicine. "All the years I practiced with Garrett and White, we saw the patient preoperative, we saw the patient daily in the hospital, then two to a dozen times postoperatively. You had sort of a continuing relationship



*Robert M. Shepard, Sr., M.D.
1889 to 1968*

for two or three months. Now they come in for morning surgery. They get up and go home that evening or the next morning. They may be seen once in the office and that's it. I'm sure it's more efficient but it's a type of practice I don't recognize and I think we've lost an important connection with the patient."

"Patients now belong to a group and sometimes they don't know who they are going to see. If you are on Medicare you may find it difficult to see anyone. It's even hard for me to find a doctor - all of a sudden all my friends are either dead or retired and now I know how patients feel."

"Many young doctors today are just looking for a job. Nowadays doctors insist on having a life. In our day you weren't allowed to have a life - all you could do was practice medicine."

In 1959, Dr. Shepard and his father were honored at a Silver Anniversary Meeting of the American College of Chest Physicians. Dr. Shepard senior was one of the 38 founding physicians of that organization. Dr. Shepard, Sr. died in 1968, just four years before one circle was completed and his son also became a president of the Tulsa County Medical Society.