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Charles A. Hoffman, M.D.: Physician, Leader, Humanist

Lawrence M. Wyner M.D.
Marshall University, wyner@marshall.edu

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Hardly a month goes by when I don't have a patient or colleague make reference to Dr. Hoffman. Most of these patients were kids when he operated on them, and many of these colleagues are now retired, but they all share the same reverence for the tall, down-to-earth physician who did his best for them. Obviously, Dr. Hoffman came of age in a very different era in medicine, when physicians were much more in control of the health care industry. What has not changed, though, is the importance of participating in organized medicine to effect change, which Dr.

Hoffman's career epitomized. How appropriate for the WVSMA to recall his memory on the occasion of its sesquicentennial! — LW

Charles A. Hoffman, M.D.: Physician, Leader, Humanist

Lawrence M. Wyner

Physician role models are as important for the seasoned practitioner as they are for the recent medical school graduate. To this end, the life and career of Charles "Carl" A. Hoffman, M.D. (Fig. 1), American Urological Association (AUA) President 1967-1968, are legion. Dr. Hoffman had humble origins in the southern Ohio industrial town of Ironton. Born in 1904, he lost both parents before the age of 10 years, and was taken in by relatives. To help support his extended family, he got an after-school job at a local pharmacy (Fig. 2a), running errands and delivering prescriptions. The sight of people suffering and in pain had a profound effect upon the young boy, who noticed the hope and anticipation in their faces when they received their medicines, and he wished he could do more to help them. After graduating from pharmacy school at The Ohio State University in 1925, he applied for a loan from the First National Bank of Ironton to buy the pharmacy. The bank president was impressed with the young man's drive and intellect. These qualities were also noted by Ohio Congressman Tom Jenkins, who offered the young pharmacist a place in the freshman class at the United States Naval Academy. Knowing that this was a major life decision, he nevertheless politely turned down the congressman's offer, enrolled at Marshall College in nearby Huntington, West Virginia, and then at the University of Cincinnati College of Medicine, all the while commuting back to Ironton on weekends to supervise his pharmacy and to pay back his loans.

However, just before his graduation from medical school in 1935, Dr. Hoffman had his own personal experience with sickness. When he developed high fevers and left flank pain, he was diagnosed with acute left pyelonephritis, eventually requiring a left nephrectomy, performed by Ray Bobbit, MD, who was one of the first urologists in Huntington. Unwilling to let this illness sap his enthusiasm, Dr. Hoffman managed to turn it into something positive. He later wrote, "God has been good to me. There is no doubt that I have been part of a master



Figure 1. Charles A. Hoffman, M.D. (1904-1981).

plan by a Supreme Being to whom I have looked for guidance and help."¹

Thus, if it was part of the "master plan" that he should lose his left kidney, this episode nonetheless galvanized his interest in urology as a career choice, as well as his lifelong empathy for his patients. Fully recovered from this temporary setback, he served his internship and residency at the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway Employees Hospital (C&O Hospital) in Huntington from 1936 to 1940. Dr. Hoffman spoke reverentially of the training that he received during his rotating internship at the C&O Hospital, built during the 1920s to accommodate workers in the region's premier industry, the railroad, until its demise in the 1970s. The interns ran the wards virtually unsupervised, treating advanced cases of syphilis, delivering babies, administering anesthetics, and performing tonsillectomies. Unlike a university training program, however, the C&O Hospital followed the preceptorship model, in which the trainee was expected

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From the Division of Urology, Joan C. Edwards School of Medicine, Marshall University, Huntington, West Virginia

Reprint requests: Lawrence M. Wyner, M.D., Division of Urology, Joan C. Edwards School of Medicine, Marshall University, Huntington, WV 25701-3657. E-mail: wyner@marshall.edu

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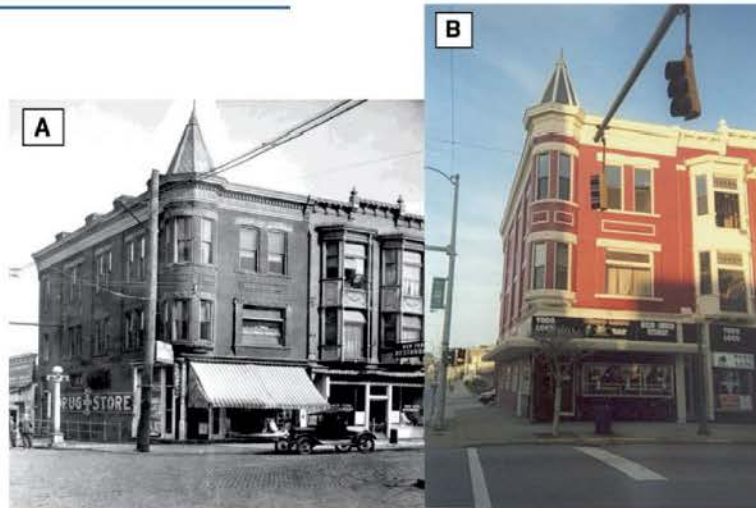


Figure 2. Dr. Hoffman's pharmacy (A) then and (B) now.

to glean experience “on the job.” Dr. Hoffman found this aspect of his training quite sobering. He later confessed, “I had to learn my specialty by hit and miss, taking care of patients with surgery, pre and postoperative care. There is no doubt in my mind that several people died because of my inexperience, since I took care of these patients without proper supervision.”¹

His overall performance must have been exemplary, however, as Dr. Bobbit invited him to join his group upon completion of the residency. He practiced with Dr. Bobbit and his partners for more than 3 years; however, unable to silence his yearning for his own practice, he rented office space on the eighth floor of the First Huntington Building, and on April 1, 1944, he opened the Hoffman Urological Clinic. At the time, Huntington, a bustling manufacturing and transportation hub on the Ohio River, was the largest inland port in the United States, and the practice thrived. As he added partners, Dr. Hoffman had the steadfast help of Anne Weber, R.N., who first met him in nursing school and went on to become his office nurse and later office manager, and who was also a member of AUA-Allied for many years. As his academic career progressed, he published 5 papers²⁻⁶ in the *Journal of Urology* between 1944 and 1961, and taught premedical courses at Marshall. His increasingly busy schedule, however, never detracted from what he always said was his first love—his patients. In addition, Dr. Hoffman's practice human resource management was legendary—he told his office staff to “work hard, improve yourselves professionally, and try to keep up with me”; yet two of our current staff who worked with him avow that at the end of each workday, he would personally thank each of them individually for their efforts.

He also became increasingly involved in organized medicine, first in West Virginia, where, as president of the state medical association in 1957 and later the AUA Mid-Atlantic Section, he was an outspoken critic of health care plans that enabled fraudulent behaviors by

patients and physicians alike. By the time Dr. Hoffman became AUA President in 1967, he was already well known in Washington, DC. And what a time it was to be thrust into leadership—as the country wrestled with a controversial war, civil unrest, and the debate over legalized abortion. But difficult times produce great leaders, and Dr. Hoffman was one of these. Perhaps his greatest achievement as AUA President was the formation of the American Association of Clinical Urologists (AACU), which he helped to found. He also campaigned tirelessly for health care for the disadvantaged, such that he was recognized by the Blackfeet Nation of the American West as Chief Holy Eagle, Na-Doo-Yi-Pi-Ta, in their tongue (Fig. 3), and his efforts were well recognized by the American Medical Association (AMA) when they elected him *their* chief in 1972 over the eminent surgeon Dr. Claude Welch of Harvard. Dr. Hoffman was very proud to serve as AMA president, and was the fifth urologist to hold this office since urology was established as a speciality in 1902 (Table 1). His inaugural address speaks as eloquently to us today on the value of organized medicine as it did when he gave it on June 21, 1972. He said, “The state of mind of most physicians today is one of profound disquiet growing out of the threat we feel each day to our profession. Almost daily, there are new infringements on the way we practice—intrusions by government and by other third parties. Almost daily, there are attacks on our methods of practice, on our methods of payment, even on our motives, and our life-styles. Too often, these attacks are not given fair tests for accuracy and truth; and always there hangs over us the looming specter of a massive government health program, undefined at the moment, and doubly disconcerting because of its uncertainty. The individual physician cannot meet this challenge by himself.”⁷

Shortly thereafter, President Nixon sent for Dr. Hoffman (Fig. 4), and the two men agreed to work together as ambassadors to the world. Dr. Hoffman's description of



The author is being inducted into the Blackfeet Indian tribe by Chief Old Person and his brother. He was given the name Chief Na-Doo-Yi-Pi-Ta or "Holy Eagle."

Figure 3. Dr. Hoffman is honored by the Blackfeet Chief (photo courtesy of Hoffman family).

Table 1. Urologists who have been elected president of the American Medical Association

Name and Term
Herman L. Kretschmer, 1944-1945
Elmer Hess, 1955-1956
Louis M. Orr, 1959-1960
George M. Fister, 1962-1963
Charles A. Hoffman, 1972-1973
Russell B. Roth, 1973-1974
Tom E. Nesbitt, 1978-1979
Frank J. Jirka, Jr., 1983-1984

their meeting is fascinating in its historical context, as it occurred within days of the Watergate break-in. In addition, it also sheds some light on the public's perceived "stigma" of a cancer diagnosis. He later wrote, "I have no idea whether my conversation with the President was recorded. If that were the case, I was not conscious of it. The first question that Mr. Nixon asked me was 'Doctor, what do you consider the most pressing problem that medicine has today?' I am sure that he expected me to talk about some problem with health care delivery or cost. My answer was simple: 'Cancer.' He said 'I'm amazed. Why do you say that?' My reply was, 'I think every physician who is dedicated and sincere never goes on the floor of a hospital where he has cancer patients—and I hate to say that most of us do at all times—without feeling helpless. We always come away with the feeling that there is so little that we can do. Often, I dread going in the room to see someone I've known for a long time pitifully ill of cancer. I think of the millions of hours and the millions of dollars spent on cancer research and how little progress we have made.' Our conversation then turned to other matters. We talked about medicine in Russia and Dr. Boris Petrovsky. As we talked, I noticed that the President seemed to be a man who was fre-

quently on edge. It may have been that he was tense because he had just come from a complicated meeting. As we continued, the President became more and more relaxed. It may be that he found my manner disarming or that he realized that I was not asking for anything for myself. We also talked about Nixon's mother and father and family. We had a very informal talk. Some of what he said was so personal that I have not divulged it to anyone. In our conversation I learned to respect the man. I had been there for about 15 minutes when the President pressed a button. I thought this meant that I should leave, so I started to get up. Then President Nixon said, 'No, just a minute.' Shortly, a man came in carrying two cups of coffee; and I had coffee with the President."¹

Thus, at the height of the Cold War, President Nixon sent Dr. Hoffman to Moscow and Leningrad as a sort of medical emissary to work together with Soviet doctors to better fight disease, our common enemy. Dr. Hoffman also visited Europe, China, Brazil, and Israel, meeting with heads of state and observing the implications of their health care delivery systems for our own. Back home, President Nixon appointed him to a blue-ribbon government panel formed to study the growing problem of medical liability. At hearings held around the country, Dr. Hoffman expressed eloquently his view that growing federal entitlements were contributing to a culture of entitlement in America, which was anathema to a self-made man. He also had concerns about the growing tendency toward early emphasis on science at the expense of the humanities in premedical education, fearing that this approach might corrupt future physicians' own humanity.

Yet, at the height of his international career, he never forgot his local community. When a plane crash decimated the Marshall University football team and its coaching staff, Dr. Hoffman was at the command center,

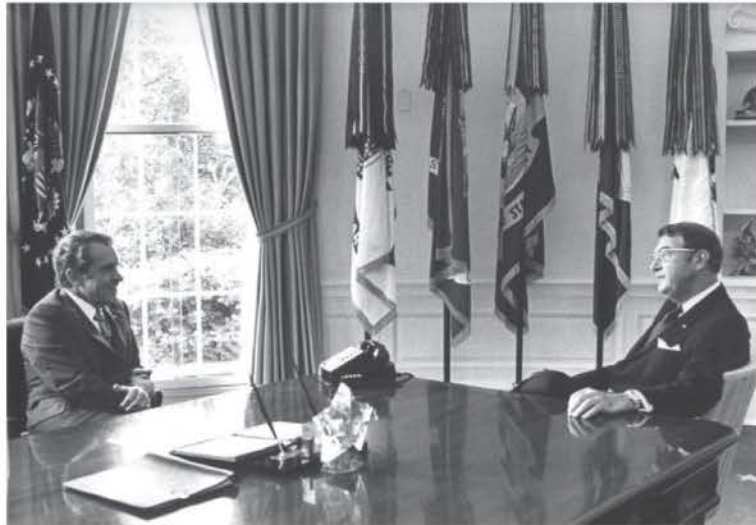


Figure 4. President Nixon and Dr. Hoffman meet for the first time in the Oval Office.

consoling the bereaved and helping University officials to notify the next of kin. He later said it was the worst thing he ever had to do.

When support was being garnered for a medical school at his alma mater, Dr. Hoffman was also there, lobbying local and national officials. And of course, his family—his wife Lynn and their 4 children—spent many happy hours cruising the Ohio River on their boat, which was equipped with a radiotelephone for patient emergencies. Moreover, as all great men eventually do, he began to write. *God, Man and Medicine*, published in 1978, is part patient handbook, memoirs, and the musings of a modern-day philosopher. In the book, Dr. Hoffman joked that his next opus would be entitled “Practicing Medicine for Fifty Years on One Kidney.” But it was not meant to be - his remaining kidney eventually gave out, and he died from complications of renal failure in 1981 at the age of 77, well short of his goal.

In many ways, however, Dr. Hoffman lives on. After his passing, his practice partners retained the name of the Hoffman Urological Clinic until the practice eventually was absorbed into the growing Marshall University Medical Center in 2005. To this day, the AACU honors the memory of Dr. Hoffman, its first president, at its annual meeting with the Hoffman Lectureship, dedicated to the preservation of physician involvement in the political process. Closer to home, the Victorian building in Iron-ton which once housed Dr. Hoffman’s pharmacy, still stands (Fig. 2b), but is now used for other commercial purposes. The Hoffman family donated their beloved boat to the University of Charleston, West Virginia, where it served many years helping to educate students in the marine biology program there. The Hoffman Collection at Marshall University Library (Fig. 5) is a gift from Dr. Hoffman to his alma mater—a quiet sanctuary where students of medicine can imbibe the wisdom of five centuries of thinkers on the pages of antique volumes. Anne Weber, R.N., Dr. Hoffman’s loyal assistant, still



Figure 5. The Hoffman Collection at Marshall University Library.

lives in Huntington, in the shadow of the hospital where she trained to be a nurse. She wrote about her former mentor, “He trudged the streets as an orphaned boy in the first decades of the twentieth century, running errands and delivering for a local drugstore, dreaming of horizons beyond Iron-ton, Ohio, the river town of his youth. Little did he realize that beyond those horizons, he would enter the world of medicine, which would take him to all parts of the earth as spokesman for his profession.”⁸

The continued participation of physicians in the political process is a living tribute to the trails blazed by Dr. Hoffman and his generation of physicians.

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References

1. Hoffman CA. *God, Man and Medicine*. Parsons, WV: McClain Printing Company; 1978.

Do You Recognize These Folks?



Courtesy of the American Medical Association. Photo by Joe Fletcher

We found this wonderful photo in our archives. If you know the names of any of the folks in this photo (except Dr. Hoffman sitting in the left corner of the couch), please send an email to angie@wvsma.org or call 304-925-0342, ext. 20.

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