A Tradition of Greatness: The Stories of Three Men at MUs School of Medicine

Samuel Bezold

February 11, 1839 was an historic day for the state of Missouri. In fact, it was an historic day for the country; on this day was founded the first school of medicine west of the Mississippi River. The Missouri government had passed legislation to institute the school at the University of Missouri. The very next year, Joseph N. McDowell, a professor of surgery and surgical anatomy, gave a speech at the laying of the cornerstone for the edifice of Kemper Colleges Medical Department (which was actually in St. Louis). His words were noble:

Our motto must be peace, and to our posts the wind of persecution may howl a hurricane, and the lightning of malice may fall upon us, but if our good ship be tight and free, our gallant mast may be bent but not broken. And like the proud eagle soaring aloft, she will ride the billow to its top of foam, and glory in the strength that overcomes the storm.

If perhaps a little melodramatic, McDowell’s words would actually prove to be quite accurate. Little did he, the attending trustees, or listening professors know, but the school would face a veritable hurricane of adversity. The medical school at the University of Missouri has undergone many changes and has resisted even more.

The school has certainly had a colorful history. Upon hearing about its very founding, let alone the many controversies regarding its rightful location, one might be surprised to know that MU Medical School stands now in Columbia, MO. In spite of such facts, the story of interest isn’t about the location of the school, its curriculum, its many consecutive residency accreditations, or its rank in the nations top medical education facilities. Over the years, many great minds have contributed to shaping its future; how these people strove for academic and medical excellence is a wonderful story.

Discussing all of the people involved in making the School of Medicine what it is today is unfeasible in a normal-sized novel and absolutely impossible in a fifteen-page documentary. Firstly, the entire history of the school from its founding to the present spans 150 years. Secondly, considering the time frame in tandem with academias dynamic nature, the number of people involved in a narrative history of the school would be massive. Lastly, justice would not be done to many of these people without chapters upon chapters to relate their accomplishments. Even though a short documentary does not have room for the many chapters needed to encompass the lives and careers of these figures, an effective narrative can still be written by focusing on only a few individuals and by supplementing it with sufficient background information.
Many people, including students, professors, deans, doctors, and legislators, have influenced the School of Medicine at Mizzou. It is easy to see how the school could have been directly affected by some of these men and women; for example, Missouri legislators voted for the creation of the school in the mid-nineteenth century. Deans concentrated on improving the school as a whole and appointed leaders who have direct say on decisions for entire departments. On the contrary, professors and students left subtler changes in their wakes, perhaps affecting a course with a question or by writing a new lab manual. Whether they were lasting or short-lived, large or minute, all of the mutations induced by these individuals stayed with the school. Adhering to this line of thought, the stories of three different men at the School of Medicine will be told: that of a professor, a doctor (and student), and a dean.

The School

The School of Medicine had a tumultuous beginning. After the opening of the Medical Department at Kemper College in 1846, there was a period of ten years during which a two-year medical schooling program existed. It was, however, in 1873 that the existing Medical Department was established. M. Pinson Neal, a doctor at MU, would state in 1970 that the school had a humble infancy and a quarrelsome adolescence. He describes in the same document that the University of Missouri established its own medical school and offered a two-year degree until 1891, when the program was extended to three years and then subsequently to four years in 1899. Unfortunately, the curriculum was cut to two years again in 1910 due to limited resources and, in spite of an attempt at resurrection in 1931, would last for a long forty-six years.

The University of Missouri was not immune to the Great Depression of the 1930s, and it almost immediately thwarts the attempt at restoring the third and fourth years at Mizzou. Six students, nicknamed the Big Six, did manage to complete their third year at Mizzou, were granted full credit by other schools, and were admitted to these schools as seniors. The push to bring back the two years would be felt into the 1940s, at which time the country was battling in the war in Europe and Asia.

While the war raged on overseas, there was a smaller one unfolding just west of the Mississippi. The Missouri state legislature nearly did bring the lost two years of the medical curriculum back in 1945, but the plan asserted that the final two years be taught in Kansas City. House Bill No. 138 was written authorizing and directing the Curators of MU to carry out this plan. In response to the bill, Guy A. Thompson, a curator of the University at the time, wrote a rebuttal to this bill, implicating that the move to Kansas City would not only be unconstitutional, but would undermine the purpose for which the School of Medicine was created:

I remind you that the major portion of your profession is practicing in urban areas. I remind you that the rural areas are the ones which feel they have been neglected by the medical profession. I remind you that a majority in the House of Representatives in the General Assembly come from the rural areas. I remind you that they must be convinced that any proposed program will solve their problem.

The House decided to reevaluate the proposal, and the two-year program at Kansas City was never created. During this same time, as the war was steadily reaching a climax, thousands of men were working and fighting for the U.S. Government. While many men were leaving the country, a man named Wesley Platner worked as an aquatic biologist for the United State Department of the Interior. Dr. Platner would soon find his way to Columbia, marking an epoch in the history of the University of Missouri.

The Professor

http://artifactsjournal.missouri.edu/2009/01/a-tradition-of-greatness-the-s...
Dr. Wesley Platner came from the northeast of the United States. He was born in Newark, New Jersey and received a Bachelor of Science and a Masters while attending schools in Pennsylvania. He received his Ph.D. in mammalian physiology from MU in 1948 and was shortly thereafter offered a position as an associate professor. He was also a loving husband and father, which is quite evident in the many letters he received over the years while being away from his wife. The letters are so multitudinous that they could probably be used to construct a detailed account of his life of traveling. However, this discussion is about the career of Mary Platners darling Wes at the University School of Medicine.

A wealth of information about Dr. Platners teaching is left in the University Archives at Mizzou; one document in particular is a treasure in this trove. E.K. Leslie sent a questionnaire to the professors at the School on May 1, 1979, which Platner completed. By this time he had already been teaching full-time for 34 years, averaging 10 credit hours per year.

Question four of this survey is perhaps the most significant – it shows that Platner enjoyed teaching. That fact in itself suggests that he was a good teacher, as do his other responses. His answers to questions seventeen and eighteen on the list show that he cared about the success of his students, who benefited from his helpfulness and enthusiasm. On May 2, 1975, a student wrote Platner a letter to thank him for sending a final exam to Kansas City, as the student was not able to sit the test in Columbia. The student also wrote, thank you for your assistance to me in during the lectureyour help was valuable in guiding me down the correct paths of thinking. Interestingly, the survey also shows that Platner felt that research was held in higher regard than teaching and led more often to salary advancement. Did Dr. Platner enjoy his teaching more than his research? The survey does not give a definitive answer, but it does suggest the possibility.

In the 21st century, teachers have access to unlimited amounts of multimedia for use in the classroom; with widespread computer and internet use, educators have little problem obtaining resources to assist them in teaching their courses. Wesley Platner didnt have that luxury in the late 1950s. During that period, teachers could request, for a fee, reels from companies who produced educational videos. Essentially, these video reels had to be rented by mail, shipped, and shipped back. Dr. Platner had to deal with this process many times and did not always have success. For example, Dr. Platner sent a letter to Armour Laboratories requesting three films for certain dates. Mary Z. Sanders of Armours Audio-Visual department responded thusly: We have arranged bookings on the dates requested We suggest that you send in your request well in advance. The individuals who had reserved the reels for the requested dates had apparently done so more than five weeks in advance. It is interesting to note such day-to-day differences for a teaching professor.

Dr. Platner was also active in creating new courses for the University Honors College; in 1980 he wrote a proposal for a Physiology of Environment Stress course. According to a letter from Ted Tarkow, the current Honors College Director, the Honors Council enthusiastically approved the course and believed it contributed to their top-notch schedule. A handout from the class lists some of the more major stress factors one can experience. The stressors range from minor violations of the law (lowest), to divorce or death of a spouse (highest).

In addition to being a professor of the School of Medicine, Platner was busy with research. He had already gained research experience while working for the U.S. Government before coming to the School of Medicine. He had tested water for various analytes, such as nitric and sulfuric acid in Roché Perché Creek in Columbia, Missouri, and made evaluations as to whether or not treatment for the water was necessary. At Mizzou, Dr. Platner engaged in animal research, something more related to his specialty in physiology. He believed in
animal rights, a concept which not all researchers considered important during this time. The Columbia Missourian featured an interview with Platner about the MU Medical Schools attentiveness to the comfort of their animals; Christine Stevens of the Animal Welfare Institute in New York read the article and praised him in a personally written letter. His research often focused on variations in temperature, including induced hypothermia, and the fluctuation of Magnesium levels in the body.

In 1959, Platner was selected as one of twelve professors from around the world to travel to Buenos Aires and give a lecture at the 21st Annual International Congress of Physiological Sciences. It must have given him and the MU School of Medicine a sense of great pride to have heard the news. His trip was quite an adventure, and he took time to travel around the continent. He recorded many of his experiences on various sheets of paper; it seems he used whatever he could get his hands on. He related his experiences with the non-English-speaking natives, with the cuisine, and other aspects of the culture. On the flight to South America he kept a journal with pieces of notepad paper stapled together. Venezuela is known for diamonds, gold, and short-lived dictators. I will not bring any of them home, he quipped in his makeshift diary. He also wrote:

Stewardess served cocktails. Now we were really flying high. See many clouds below and its getting rough. Captain said he was changing to superchargers and noise would be less but cant notice any difference, better have another cocktail.

Upon his arrival in Rio de Janeiro (one of the connecting cities during his flight), Platner received a personal welcome note from the mayor; at that moment he must have felt proud that his work had made such an impact on a world-wide scale. Wesley Platner left a legacy of diligence and excellence at the MU School of Medicine, the level of which one would be hard-pressed to attain. Some would arguably do just that.

The Doctor

In 1958, a seven year-old girl named Paula came to the University of Missouri hospital with a seemingly incurable disease. No one expected her to be able to live a normal life; she became short of breath at even the slightest exertion. Paula had hole inside her heart. The wall between her hearts atria had never been sealed, and now she had an egg-shaped gap which was causing poor circulation throughout her body. The doctors of the hospital surgery department, headed by the young Hugh Stephenson, Jr., had their work cut out for them. But thanks to a new apparatus called the heart-lung machine and this team of surgery professionals, Paulas heart was repaired. The leader of the team, Hugh Stephenson Jr., was a native of Columbia, Missouri and graduated in 1943 from Missouri University School of Medicine. He would go on to become one of the most influential men in the history of the School.

Dr. Stephenson was, in 1957, the youngest doctor in the United States to be the Chief Surgeon of a University Hospital and chairman of the Department of Surgery in a School of Medicine. Thanks to his intensive research, he made great contributions to the treatment of cardiac arrest. The Missouri Alumnus featured him in an article titled, More than a Surgeon, in which they outlined his many achievements:

He designed and developed the first Mobile Cardiac Resuscitation Unit which makes it possible to have at hand all necessary resuscitative material to avoid irreversible brain damages that occur after a four-minute delay in heart stoppage. Dr. Stephenson helped establish the first course in Cardiac Resuscitation He designed a cardiac defibrillator for shocking the heart, one of the current means of starting heart action after arrest. Royalties go to the University.
Dr. Stephenson was also instrumental in the re instituted the four-year program at Mizzou, traveling to over 160 medical institutions worldwide to study their programs. He personally spoke to legislators in the Missouri House of Representatives about the states need for a four-year program at the University, and, soon enough, construction began on the new facilities in Columbia.

Such a man might be seen by some as being larger than life or perhaps unapproachable. Indeed, some patients are sometimes afraid to bother their doctors because of a physicians busy workload. Dr. Stephenson would be on the extreme side of this spectrum; however, many patients wrote personal thank you letters to him. One patient wrote on October 25, 1960:

Two years ago in November I entered the Hospital with infection in ulcers of both legs thinking both legs would have to be amputated. And this year [I] was dismissed, not completely healed but so much better I will always thank god for the wonderful Dr. at the Medical Center.

Patients also spoke highly of Dr. Stephenson to their other physicians. Dr. Gerard Zauder, D.O. wrote:

This morning I removed the stitches from [your patient] as you directed. His praise of you, your associates, residents, nurses, and hospital personnel was so great and so sincere that I am prompted to add my thanks. I am sure that the anticipated growth of the University of Missouri Medical Center will be reached with this type of patient care and relation that you fostering; that the University of Missouri Medical Center will find its place among the great medical teaching institutions of the world.

Since retiring after an illustrious career, Hugh Stephenson Jr., MD, BS Med., John Growdon Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Surgery, has become the unofficial MU School of Medicine historian. His book, Aesculapius Was a Mizzou Tiger, contains over 1000 pages of history and photos pertaining to Mizzous School of Medicine; Stephenson personally witnessed over fifty years of this history. In fact, Dr. Stephenson spoke highly of one certain man in interviews and in his book. This man was another of Mizzous strong leaders, but he was also a compassionate professional.

The Dean

Imagine being a new medical student at Mizzou and attending the White Coat Ceremony, a welcome for future doctors at MU since 1997. A man in a suit and bowtie stands at attention on the stage, but he has a friendly look about him. He greets all of the students personally, making sure that a white lab coat with the proper fit is found for each. This is the man who served as Dean of the University of Missouri School of Medicine for ten years, fourth longest of any Dean in the history of the school, and the man whom Dr. Hugh Stephenson has called a kind and sensitive human being. His name is Lester Bryant.

Dr. Lester R. Bryant was a brilliant man. He graduated first in his class at the University of Cincinnati College of Medicine in 1955. He served as chief resident surgeon at the school. A Kentucky native, he later received a Doctor of Science degree in surgery from the University of Kentucky and soon became a professor there. He was also active in research, having been cited as author or co-author in over 150 peer-reviewed scientific articles. In addition to giving dozens of lectures about surgery across the globe, he served in various leadership positions in medical education facilities. He accepted the position of Dean at MU School of Medicine in 1989.

One of the things that distinguishes the School of Medicine from nearly any other medical education institution is its unique curriculum. One of the first things Dean Bryant did upon his arrival was to appoint a
task force to examine the traditional curriculum. In an interview by the Missouri Medical Review, Bryant says that [m]ost people who talk about my era at this medical school remember me for coming here and being impolite enough to suggest that this institution had a very good 1960s medical school curriculum. Under Dean Bryant, the new Problem-Based Learning curriculum was established; Mizzou was the first to adopt a curriculum which completely excluded the traditional lecture-based system.

Compared to the traditional lecture-based system of teaching, the School of Medicines new method is rather radical. The problem-based learning system gives a small group of students a weekly real-life medical dilemma which they must solve. The idea is to expose students to clinical medicine immediately, as opposed to going straight into the raw science of medicine. The PBL system, in theory, helps prepare students to be doctors from the beginning. Moreover, the system encourages students to be actively thinking. Melissa Threlkeld of the Columbia Missourian compares the students to detectives as she writes:

Stoshski had been a patient before, so his case was familiar. His file indicated he was having difficulty breathing during his stay in the coronary care unit. The attending physician indicated that Stoshskis chest congestion had gotten worse With all the information at hand, it was then up to the student sleuths to decide what other tests needed to be ordered for diagnosis and treatment.

In the Columbia Daily Tribune, Janice Winters writes further about the PBL system. She states that [the] risk has paid off in motivated students, stellar examination scores (unparalleled in MU history) and rejuvenated faculty.

Establishing the lauded new curriculum was not Bryants only commendable labor. He also helped to create the MU Area Health Education Center in 1994, whose Rural Medical Scholars Program is designed to expose medical, nursing, and allied-health students to rural medicine and to encourage them to return there after graduation. The Dean, who was familiar with rural Kentucky, Louisiana, and West Virginia, knew about the struggle to provide quality health care in such areas. He explains that those of us who become healthcare professionals generally train in an environment where the specialties are represented. In other words, doctors dont tend to worry about a broad skill range because they can generally refer patients to the appropriate specialist. In rural areas, doctors dont have this luxury. Bryant worked to have part of the physician training experience include time in the rural communities of Missouri.

It is interesting to note that not only is Lester Bryant remembered for improving the School of Medicine and University Hospital system, but even more so is he respected for his magnanimous personality. Many have called him a sensitive man, and more still have been surprised by his ability to remember the names of the seemingly endless number of people he has met, thereby conveying an even greater sense of his personable nature. Hugh Stephenson wrote in his history of the Medical School that Dean Bryant had a particular persuasive ability. Bryant was able to persuade Missouri Senator Kit Bond to expand the heart surgery program at the Veterans Administration Hospital as well as that of a new ambulatory care facility.

Certainly, there have been many great leaders, including Deans, in the history of the School of Medicine. Todays dean needs a wide knowledge of the institution and its assets, but also a broad knowledge of medical education in general. Lester Bryant had just that. Although he has retired, moved to North Carolina, and often spends time with his family in Kentucky, the work that Dean Bryant did at Mizzou will not be easily forgotten. Bryants face remains in the medical school on a plaque on display next to former deans, and his name lives on in the Lester R. Bryant Auditorium, the current site for the White Coat Ceremony.
Indeed, there have been a great many people who have helped to build the School of Medicine at Mizzou into its current thriving state; for over 150 years these individuals endeavored for excellence and fought to expand the School's programs and potential. The three men discussed here certainly rank as some of the greatest. In 1854, when the first students of the School of Medicine at MU were attending their graduation, a professor named John Barnes gave an inspiring valedictory speech. He quotes the words of Sydney Smith, a British writer from the early nineteenth century. The words were not only inspiring to the graduates who heard them, but seem to describe those people who came long after the words were spoken striving for greatness and unrelenting in the face of adversity.

In conclusion, permit me to remark, in the language of one of the brightest spirits of the age, that the fire of our minds is like the fire which the Persians burn in the mountains—its flames, night and day, and immortal, and not to be quenched!

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