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HISTORICAL *Review* of BERKS COUNTY

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The Berks County Medical Society

175 Years of Medical Professionalism

(EDITOR'S NOTE: On the evening of August 7, 1999, the Berks County Medical Society was officially 175 years old. Founded in 1824, the Society has embraced numerous names, memberships, locations, and positions on medical care. The following article features highlights of these various areas of the Society's life.)

by Michael B. Kane

The Berks County Medical Society was the first such organization in the state outside of Philadelphia (the Philadelphia College of Physicians was founded in 1797). That Berks County should be the leader in this important field was indicative of the high level of medical expertise found here almost from the first county settlement by the Swedes around 1700. In many instances, graduate physicians from Europe migrated first to Philadelphia (many to Germantown), then up the Schuylkill River to what was to become Berks County in 1752.

The first record of a graduate physician living in the county area dates to 1720, when **Dr. Jacques De La Planck** signed a petition for the formation of a new township to be named Oley. A circa 1700 graduate of the University of Basle, Switzerland, De La Planck migrated to America soon after graduation and was among the first wave of Huguenots to seek refuge in the New World. De La Planck settled first in Germantown before relocating to the Oley area sometime prior to 1720. His family history holds that the young doctor was on his way to a wilderness settlement along the Schuylkill when he stopped to attend a severely ill woman in the Oley area. His successful treatment of this patient led to the request by the Oley settlers that he remain there. Apparently he remained not only as the village doctor but also as a prime mover in the further establishment of the community.

The second graduate physician to reside in Berks County was **Dr. George De Benneville**, an England-born French Huguenot. De Benneville was the son of a French Huguenot who fled to England because of religious persecution under Louis XIV. Born in 1703, he was educated at the best English schools and traveled extensively throughout Europe. When he arrived at Germantown in 1743, he was a practicing physician, as well as a teacher and a preacher of the gospel. Soon after his arrival in America, De Benneville met **Jean Bertolet** of Oley who convinced the doctor/preacher to settle in that community. De Benneville practiced in Oley for 15 years before returning to Philadelphia.

The third doctor in Berks County was native-born **Jonathan Potts** from Colebrookdale, a grandson of Berks pioneer iron master Thomas Potts. Because of the family's wealth, Jonathan—

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born April 11, 1745 — had access to the best education available in colonial America. He attended preparatory school in Ephrata, then studied in Philadelphia. Deciding to make medicine his life's work, Potts first studied in Edinburgh, Scotland for approximately a year, then returned to enter the Medical Institute of Philadelphia. He was valedictorian of the Institute's first graduating class of 1768. He soon after chose to practice medicine in Reading. (He is listed on the tax roll for 1771.)

Potts quickly became an active member in Reading affairs. In 1771, he addressed an article to German inhabitants (Berks County in particular) on the "Utility of Vaccination," a smallpox therapy *opposed* by most citizens at that time. He was also a strong revolutionist, serving as a delegate to the Provincial Council of Deputies in 1774 and a member of the Provincial Congress in 1775. He organized Berks forces in 1776 and was appointed Physician Surgeon (a short list, since few doctors were also qualified and trained in surgery) in the Continental Army on July 6, 1776.

On January 1, 1777, General George Washington appointed Dr. Potts as Director General of the Northern Hospitals. He worked in hospitals in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, and was in charge of the military hospitals at Bethlehem and Ephrata. (Smaller war hospitals were established at Reading, also, and were located in the Courthouse, the potters shop, First Reformed Church, the Friends Meeting House, and Trinity Lutheran Church.) Potts was then named Purveyor General of the Hospital Department of the Continental Army. The main warehouse for medical supplies was located in Reading, relatively safe from British raids. From here, Dr. Potts dispensed medical supplies for the army, as well as money for hospital expenses and salaries. He was only 36 years old when he died in 1781 at Reading.

Around 1772, Berks County welcomed its fourth and most renowned doctor, **Bodo Otto**. He was born 1709 in the Kingdom of Hanover, Germany, to a distinguished family in the service of Privy Counselor Baron Bodo von Oberg (who

was both young Bodo's namesake and godfather). His education in surgery was received at the University of Göttingen, where he also studied anatomy, physiology, botany, and physics. He served as a physician in German military hospitals before coming to America in 1755. Like many of the immigrants from his country, Otto settled in Germantown, where he gained recognition for his medical and surgical skills. After nearly 20 years of medical experience, Bodo Otto relocated to Reading in the 1772-73 period, where he took over Dr. Kuhn's Apothecary, which had been in Reading since 1753.

At Reading, Otto joined with Dr. Potts in the organization of Revolutionary forces. Although America was his *adopted* country, and he was nearly 70 years old, he volunteered his services to General Washington. Otto and his two sons, John A. and Bodo, Jr., both doctors, served at Valley Forge, in charge of the field hospital at Yellow Springs during the terrible winter of 1777-78. Otto resigned his position in 1781 at age 72, when the hospital was closed by the Army command. Following the war, Otto returned to practice in Philadelphia and Baltimore. Then, in 1785, he returned to his son, John, and to a practice in Reading, where he died in 1787. He is buried at Trinity Lutheran Church, where he was an honored member. His other son, Bodo, Jr., a Colonel of New Jersey troops, died of consumption, contracted while he was in the army.

Following his assistantship with his father during the war, **Dr. John A. Otto**, returned to Reading, continued the operation of the Apothecary, and acquired an enviable reputation as a surgeon both locally and throughout the state. His son, **Dr. John Bodo Otto**, also had a successful practice in Reading, as well as carrying on the family tradition of the Apothecary. And he was to become one of the founders of the Medical Faculty of Berks County, the first gathering together of local doctors into a professional organization.

The Medical Faculty of Berks County

On July 14, 1824, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania granted an application for a charter and articles of incorporation to the practicing physicians of Berks County to form a legal organization. To this end, the doctors met on Saturday evening, August 7, 1824, to form what was to be called The Medical Faculty of Berks County. That such a society should come into being at that time manifests the level of professionalism among the physicians of the county.

Essentially, the purpose was to create what is now called a *shared database*. Although they were all working in the same county, distances between them were great in the practical sense, since transportation consisted of one or two horse-power at best. In addition to those practicing within the city limits, there were doctors then in Kutztown, Birdsboro, Womelsdorf, Douglassville, Rehersburg, Lenhartsville, and Orwigsburg, which was originally part of Berks County before joining Schuylkill County.

Since there were no hospitals established in the county at this time, physicians had no place they could interact professionally. In truth, doctors of 1824 can be said to have practiced alone. Just getting these doctors together in one place took an effort. But the first members made that effort to share information about the diseases, deaths, and general health of the patients in their areas.

At that first meeting in Reading's public building, The State House on the northeast corner of Fifth and Penn Streets, **Dr. Isaac Hiester**, who certainly could be regarded as one of Berks County's "ruling elite," was elected president by unanimous vote of the assembly. He would hold that post for some 24 years.

Hiester was born in Bern Township on June 22, 1785, where the assembled Hiesters had large land holdings since 1732 and from where they had become an affluent part in the establishment of the market town of Reading. Many of the Hiesters became lawyers but Isaac wanted to be a doctor. He studied at the University of Pennsylvania and when he returned to Reading to set up a practice he also became what one historian has called a "bold visionary."

And while his leadership of the Medical Faculty of Berks County continued he was, at the same time, involved with Friedrich List, scientist and expatriate editor of *Der Readinger Adler*. In an 1829 "exploration" to the wilderness area beyond the Blue Mountains, List and Hiester discovered vast deposits of anthracite coal, acquiring parcels of land near Tamaqua. But their findings were only important if a way could be found to bring the coal to markets. Ultimately, the two men founded the Little Schuylkill Railroad Company with Dr. Hiester as president; in a series of corporate moves the Little Schuylkill was folded into the newer Philadelphia & Reading Railroad, of which the good doctor was one of the incorporators.

Dr. Hiester would also become involved in the founding of the Reading gas works and the city water supply system. And just four years before Hiester would become president of the doctors' organization a cousin, Joseph Hiester, was elected governor of Pennsylvania.

At the first meeting of the Medical Faculty of Berks County on August 7, 1824, two vice presidents were chosen: the aforementioned Dr. John Bodo Otto and **Dr. Christian Ludwig Schlemm**, who had come to Kutztown in 1818 and established a practice there.

In his inaugural address, Dr. Hiester outlined the mission of the organization and the challenges facing the profession: "Carefully to observe diseases," he said, "diligently to watch their immense variety of symptoms, and faithfully to charge the memory with the effects of remedies, as guides in future practice, are duties indispensable to every practitioner who aims at individual excellence."

Hiester understood that the advancement of medical science depended on the active and collaborative efforts of its practitioners, efforts that took quite a high level of dedication. He stated: "Dispersed, however, as we are, in different parts of the country [*sic*], and confined to our respective circles of practice by a pursuit at once ardent and painful, we have little leisure and perhaps less inclination, to commit to paper for the inspection of others, the results of our individual experience and observation. Without the advantages of free exchange and comparison of knowledge with our brethren in practice, we are inclined to listen to the suggestions of vanity, and imagine ourselves standards of perfection, while we glide into a dull routine of practice, exclusively founded on our own limited experience."

Unlike some other professions, such as law and theology,
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Medical Society

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of which outsiders could often achieve at least a rudimentary understanding, the physician, according to Dr. Hiester, "... has been taught a science and a language not intelligible to anyone out of his profession." In isolation, a physician might be inclined to retreat within himself and risk dissipation of both the science and the nomenclature, Hiester suggested. Thus, formation of a medical society was critical "... to counteract such tendency by creating a spirit of generous emulation, to elevate the profession by exciting a thirst for general knowledge, and to cultivate a taste for observation and inquiry by combining efforts and skills of physicians in various parts of the..." county.

At that first meeting, the organization adopted a resolution emphasizing its "*undiminished confidence in vaccination*" to combat small pox prevalent in Berks at that time. (Historically, it's important to note that Dr. Jonathan Potts had expressed similar confidence in small pox vaccination 53 years earlier – in 1771 – and had largely been ignored by a suspicious public.)

As many historical researchers know, writing of history is often frustrating because of the lack of retained records. For the years following the formation of the Medical Faculty of Berks County until 1848, there are no records of the activities of the group.

The Medical Society of the City of Reading and County of Berks

In 1848, a petition was passed to revive the Medical Faculty of Berks County, which indicates that the group had become irregular in its meetings. The revival was spurred, perhaps, by the first annual state medical convention, held in Lancaster that year, in which three delegates – **Drs. John P. Hiester, William Moore, and J. Horace Seltzer** – were elected from Berks County. Dr. Hiester was elected a vice president of the first body of officers of the Medical Society of the State of Pennsylvania. (He would later be elected president of the state Society for the year 1853.)

In 1849, the state meeting was held in Reading, with six delegates from the local Medical Faculty. Thirty-one members of the state medical organization met on April 11 in the Universalist Church. Quite interestingly, one of the resolutions of this meeting was that the Society approved of a plan of *universal vaccination throughout the state*. Opposition to vaccination still ran high in Pennsylvania. Another important resolution was adopted to secure by legislation the registration of births, marriages, and deaths.

On February 23, 1850, the local group of doctors reorganized under the name of The Medical Society of the City of Reading and County of Berks. The Society met then with "... the object of cultivating the science of medicine in all its collateral branches; to elevate and sustain medical character; to encourage a system of professional etiquette; and to promote mutual improvement, social intercourse and good feeling among the members of the medical profession." The Society met quarterly in members' offices and remained active in the State Society.

In addition to Dr. John Hiester's state presidency in 1853, **Dr. Edward Wallace**, a Berks member, served as the State Society's president in 1860 and 1861. There was no state meeting in 1861 "*owing to the unsettled condition of the country from the war to suppress the rebellion.*"

When the Civil War broke out, a large number of Berks doctors – as in the Revolutionary War – served both the fighting armies and the medical service.

Dr. Israel Cleaver entered the Union Army in 1863 after graduating from the University of Pennsylvania. He was Assistant Surgeon of a Marine Brigade. **Dr. W. Murray Weidman** was an Assistant Surgeon of the 11th Pennsylvania Cavalry. **Dr. Reuben Rhoads** raised a company of volunteers and was given a Surgeon's commission in charge of a Brigade Hospital. **Dr. Peter G. Bertolet** was a Surgeon in the provost marshal's office in Reading.

Other notable physicians who served at this time included **Dr. Samuel C. Ermentrout**, who would later serve in the Prussian army in 1870; a **Dr. Trexler**, who was a surgeon for the 73rd Pennsylvania Volunteers and marched with General Sherman; and **Drs. Hiester Nagle, Samuel Kurtz, and Charles H. Hunter**.

During the Civil War the first recognizable hospital came into being in Reading. It was actually called the *Reading Hospital*, but should not be confused with the **Reading Dispensary**, which was the true antecedent to the present-day Reading hospital and Medical Center. The Civil War hospital was located in the main exhibition building of the Agricultural Society on Penn's Commons (now City Park). That hospital was under the charge of **Drs. Martin Luther and John Brooke**, both commissioned Surgeons and members of the local Society.

When the war ended, the name of the local doctors' group underwent another name change to **Berks County Medical Society**. And under that name a Table of Fees was adopted on January 16, 1866. Here is an example of some of the fees:

For single visit in a case	\$1.00 – 3.00
For each hr. detained over one hour	1.00
For an <i>ordinary</i> visit	1.00 – 1.50
For every additional mile50 – 1.00
For every additional patient in the same family50
For rising at night & a visit	2.00 – 3.00
For verbal advice & prescription or medicine50 – 10.00
For written advice	2.00 – 10.00
For ordinary case of midwifery	10.00 – 20.00
For delivery of placenta	5.00 – 10.00
For reducing fracture of femur	10.00 – 50.00
For reducing other fractures	5.00 – 20.00
For amputation of leg or arm	25.00 – 100.00
For amputation of finger or toe	5.00 – 20.00
For trepanning (to make hole in skull to relieve pressure on brain)	25.00 – 100.00
For removal of stone from bladder	25.00 – 200.00
For gonorrhea or syphilis (at least one-half in advance)	10.00 – 50.00

The table goes on, covering nearly every event that might require treatment. It was another indication of doctors working within an organization. However, for reasons that are not clear in the records, the Society disbanded at the end of 1870.

The "down time" would be brief.

Change, Growth & Learning

A revived organization was formed in January of 1871, under yet another permutation of the name (*Medical Society of the County of Berks*), headed by **Dr. William Moore** as president.

The reorganization saw the Society grow and flourish. Meeting at the North Fourth Street offices of Dr. J. B. Brooke for the next ten years, the Society continued to share information, and vote on resolutions [it *reaffirmed* its stand on vaccination in 1872], and it introduced a steady stream of visiting specialists as part of a determined effort to stay current with the swiftly-changing medical profession.

During the 1880s, the Society took stands on several issues concerning the general welfare. In 1880, member **Dr. Israel Cleaver** presented the subject of "Physical Culture" to the Society. This presentation led to an endorsement of teaching calisthenics "... to improve the health of the youth of our city by offering them a mode of exercise which is at once light, healthful and absolutely free from danger. . ." Dr. Cleaver organized classes for both children and adults.

In 1882, the Society condemned the practice of copyrighting common pharmaceutical preparations by registering them with trademarks. Similarly, in 1884, the Society resolved, "That a committee of three be appointed to examine into the law governing the sale of poisons, and that the committee meet with the Druggists' Association of this city (Reading) for the purposing of considering such action as may prevent or restrict indiscriminate sale of the same." The Society, during those years, also endorsed the establishment of a national medical library and surgical museum in Washington, D.C., and voted for the creation of a State Board of Health.

From 1886 to 1891, having ended meetings in Dr. Brooke's offices, the Society led a somewhat nomadic existence: Library Hall at 5th & Franklin, the Board of Trade Rooms at 522 Penn, then at the dispensary club rooms at 30 South Fifth. At least they didn't have far to carry anything that went with them. Finally, in 1891, the Society settled in at the city's Common Council Chambers, at Fifth & Franklin, where it was to meet for the next ten years.

In 1896, the Society inaugurated the first publication presented by the group. The initial Committee on Publications—**Drs. Henry Landis, Samuel L. Kurtz, and Israel Cleaver**—were charged to collect, compile, and publish in pamphlet form all the scientific transactions of the Society during the calendar year. This pamphlet was published annually on January 1, or as soon after that date as possible. This publication contained all papers presented before the Society during the previous year, as well as the discussions these papers prompted. The so-called "pamphlet" turned into a formidable publication, containing advertisements and ranging between 80 and 150 pages per issue. It was published continually until 1910.

During this time, the Society involved itself with concerns of the city. Example: on August 11, 1896, the following resolution was submitted to the Mayor and the Presidents of both branches of City Council: "*Whereas, it is clearly within the province of the medical profession to take cognizance of the sanitary features of municipal progress, improvement and legisla-*

tion, therefore, Resolved, that from the point of sanitation, it is the sense of the Berks County Medical Society that, as compared with brick, asphaltum is to be preferred for paving the streets of this city as being more easily kept clean, and what is of more importance to the sick, is noiseless in the passing of vehicles and other traffic."

A Home of Their Own

By the end of the 1890s, the Society had outgrown the facilities at the Common Council Chambers of City Hall. There was standing-room-only at many of the meetings and, frequently, the Society had to change its schedule to avoid conflicts with city government functions. However, that was the price for being, as the Society called it, "dependent guests of the city."

To address this problem, **Dr. John B. Raser**, a Society member, offered the use of the second floor of his building at Sixth & Walnut Streets (Raser's Drug Store) free of rental or other charges. The Society now had its *first permanent home*. It was dedicated on April 1, 1900, as **Medical Hall**.

With housing problems solved, the Society moved on to other critical matters. The first full-time establishment of a medical library was undertaken when **Dr. W. M. Weidman**, a lover of books and a collector, was named Librarian. At his untimely death barely a year later the medical library was fully established.

The Society then moved to solve its publication problems. When the annual booklet of the year's transactions proved inadequate to communicate with the membership, the Society replaced it with a monthly bulletin in 1911. This new publication, titled *The Bulletin*, announced the meetings and contained articles of current Society and medical activities. At that time, the secretary of the Society assumed the editorship. This publication has been in effect ever since that date. (In 1955, the name was changed to *The Medical Record*. Today, *The Berks County Medical Record* is in its 90th volume, with eight issues published annually under the present editorship of **Dr. S. LeRoy Maiorana**.)

Returning to housing problems: By 1910, the Society believed it was time to purchase a headquarters of its own. Spurred by **Dr. Ira G. Shoemaker's** paper, "*A Look into the Future: A New Home for the Berks County Medical Society*," a new committee was established to look into the matter, with Dr. Shoemaker as the chair.

After much research and discussion within the New Home Commission—which at one time consisted of 25 members—a building was selected at 429 Walnut Street. The building was originally called the Griscom Mansion after William G. Griscom, vice president of the Reading Hardware Company, who purchased the property designated as 427-429 Walnut in 1872 from Mrs. Mary Stevens. Griscom built the residence and then sold it to George E. Stevens in 1884, who in turn sold it to S. W. Kerr in 1890; Kerr operated a private school there. Businessman George D. Horst—of the Nolde & Horst knitting mill family—purchased the house in 1912, after which the building was referred to as the Horst Mansion.

In any event, Horst helped with the financing of the deal that brought the Society into the picture, leasing it free to the
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Medical Society

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physicians for three years. Ultimately, the Society became the full owner, leasing rooms to the Visiting Nurse Association (originally at \$5 a month). Apartments in the mansion were also rented out; the Reading Dental Society rented the facility for its meetings.

The first permanent Medical Hall would serve the doctors for more than 40 years.



MEDICAL HALL, the headquarters of the Berks County Medical Society, is seen in the late 1930s. It had earlier been known as the Griscom Mansion and the Horst Mansion. Note the left-hand portion of the building, which is set back from the street. The Berks Visiting Nurse Association had its quarters there. (Photo by John Tenschert)

The Medical Society had not been in its new house for long when America entered the First World War. Special meetings in Medical Hall focused on the medical service requirements of the pending war. At one point – in May of 1917 – the Society sent a resolution to the President of the United States and to the Congress urging the passage of a bill "... prohibiting the manufacture and sale of alcoholic drinks during the time the United States is at war in order that the grains may be used for life-giving products and the efficiency of the nation may be increased."

Some Society members served at home for the recruiting service; others were assigned camp duty, where they served as camp physicians and trainers. Many did field service as battlefield physicians and surgeons. A tablet was placed in Medical Hall naming all members who served in the war.

There might well have been another tablet listing those who fought in the war against the Great Flu Epidemic of 1918; that was a total effort by doctors and nurses in Berks County. (The epidemic is covered fully in a special article beginning on page 163.)

The Past 75 Years

Self-congratulatory elements were in the history of the Medical Society in 1924 – the 100th year! **Dr. H. H. Muhlenberg** headed the Society during that year; vice presidents were **Dr. H. U. Miller** and **Dr. D. S. Grim**.

Given that anniversary, Reading was again chosen to host the 74th annual session of the Medical Society of the State of Pennsylvania, held in the Rajah Temple, October 6-9. Registered attendance was 883. At the conclusion of the convention, the local Society was honored by having two of its members elected to state office for 1925. **Dr. Ira G. Shoemaker** was elected president, and **Dr. Frank G. Runyeon** was elected a vice-president.

These men and their Berks colleagues would be looking forward to a time of great changes in the medical profession and the public issues motivating many of them.

A major development in 1926 was the completion of the **new Reading Hospital** (in West Reading), as well as the addition to St. Joseph Hospital in Reading. Members of the Society who held positions at these hospitals were frequently consulted during the two construction projects.

At the end of '26, the Society's medical library amounted to approximately 5,100 volumes. Also, in the year-end report of the Trustees, it was recommended that the Society either enlarge Medical Hall or erect a new structure. The seeds for a **new Medical Hall** were thusly planted. (This same recommendation was made again at the end of 1927, and *often* after that.)

In 1927, one of the most controversial topics in medicine was **birth control**. On January 14th a special meeting of the Society was called to hear Dr. Charles F. Cooper, Medical Director of the Clinical Research Department of the American Birth Control League, New York, speak on contraception. Dr. Cooper's talk focused on the facts that women had the franchise to vote, were educated, and had demands concerning all aspects of pregnancy. He addressed how birth control impacted population control, the mental well-being of women, and the incidence of abortions. Of special note, **Dr. Margaret Hassler**, a local pediatrician and a strong supporter of family planning was a guest at this meeting.

A lively discussion followed Dr. Cooper's presentation, with the secretary reading acts passed by the Pennsylvania Assembly in 1870 and 1897 that prohibited the publication of obscene advertisements and the sale of noxious medicines. An amendment to those acts was also read that would exclude from the acts the sale and/or prescription of contraceptive drugs, preparations, or appliances by physicians to their patients. The amendment would also allow physicians to give patients information and advice about birth control. Also read was a resolution passed by the Section of Obstetrics, Gynecology and Abdominal Surgery of the American Medical Association on May 29, 1925, that recommended the alteration of existing laws so that physicians could legally provide contraception to their patients.

Dr. Hiester H. Muhlenberg made the motion that the Society *endorse* the A.M.A. resolution; **Dr. Irvin H. Hartman** seconded the motion. **Dr. Ira G. Shoemaker** questioned the moral right of the Society to endorse the amendment, and **Dr. Leon C. Darrah** said he did not think anyone would be concerned about an overpopulation that would occur 200 years hence. **Dr. Clara Shetter-Keiser** stated that, in the future, meetings would be necessary to encourage women to have children if the amendment were passed.

Of the 35 members in attendance, 13 voted in favor of the A.M.A. resolution, 9 voted against it, 13 abstained from voting.

(At the next regular meeting in February, those doctors attending voted 8 for and 2 against a motion to *delete* the minutes concerning the special meeting amendment vote from the records. This action, however, was never carried out; the minutes still remain in the 1927 records.)

The Great Depression of the 1930s was hard on the Society and on individual doctors, as it was on everyone. At Medical Hall, an apartment went unrented, the Berks County Commissioners vacated the quarters they had leased for clinics, and some of the organizations that leased space could not pay their rents. The Visiting Nurse Association, however, signed its lease and helped offset some of those losses. On a personal level more than a few doctors extended no bills to patients who had become unwitting victims of the Depression.

Surviving the 1930s, the Society began the 1940s with a heated debate on the formation of the *Voluntary Insurance Medical Service Plan* prepared by the State Society. A motion was forwarded that the local Society secede as a component member of the State Society if that group should loan any monies to the insurance plan. The vote on the motion was 20 for and 21 against, and the motion was not passed. At this time, the Society was in good condition in terms of membership and finances. There was an optimistic outlook for the decade.

Then came December 7, 1941!

As they responded to all the wars that occurred during the history of the Berks County Medical Society, the membership rallied to support the nation during the second World War, listing all the members who served both overseas and at home would be too extensive for this report. But there were many. Community General Hospital, for example, reported that over 50 percent of its medical and nursing staff were in the military during WW II. After the war there was but a short respite, since members of the Society, along with the rest of the country, were called upon, again, to partake in the Korean Conflict.

In the 1950s, the Society echoed the prosperity of the decade. The membership believed it was time to build a new, modern facility to replace Medical Hall – the former Griscom/Forst Mansion – which the group had been using since 1912. In a recent issue of *The Berks County Medical Record*, editor R. S. LeRoy Maiorana gave this account of events leading up to the new building:



dedicated on October 30, 1957, this new building at 429 Walnut Street, Reading, was the headquarters of the Berks County Medical Society for 35 years. In 1992, the Society sold the building to the Berks AIDS Network.

Historical Review of Berks County

"In 1955, the Building Committee, chaired by Dr. Benjamin F. Souders, passed a resolution to authorize architect and builder fees not to exceed \$120,000 for the building (of the new facility). It was felt that the existing, old BCMS building 'failed to meet the Society's basic needs, and it not only did not reflect credit on the organization which it represented, but what indeed an eyesore to this community.'

"The Society legally authorized itself to attain a debt of \$100,000, but this amount was not reached since collection of the first two augmented Building Fund assessments, totaling more than \$50,000, was effected during the period of construction. The New Hall of the BCMS was formally dedicated on October 30, 1957."

In the early 1960s, the Society made a significant change in its management. Run by officers since 1824, the Society hired a professional staff for the first time in 1961. **Sherwood C. Young** was named Executive Director, a position he held for 25 years.

An important program in the 1960s was a mass immunization program for polio, using Sabin Oral Vaccine. This was a cooperative effort among Berks, Lehigh, and Northampton counties, with Berks serving as the hub of operations. **Dr. George E. Pettis** was general chairman of the Committee for Polio Immunization.

The voluntary charges for this program were 10 cents for pre-school children and 25 cents for all others, although no one was rejected for inability to pay. During phase one of "Operation Oral Immunization" 164,225 Berks County men, women, and children were vaccinated. Dr. Pettis was specifically cited for the success of the immunization program.

Other community service programs established by the Society included:

- Glaucoma Detection Clinics
- Diabetic Detection Clinics
- Athletic Injury Symposium
- Ambulance & Emergency Vehicle Driver Training
- Seminars on rehabilitation programs (with the Berks Heart Association)
- Safety seat belt campaigns (with the Junior Chamber of Commerce)
- Homemaker Service (in-home assistance program)

In addition to these programs, the Medical Society also awards two scholarship grants each year at the Reading-Berks Science Fair to student projects of medical concern. And the Society Speaker's Bureau was and still is available to the community.

Headed Towards 200 Years

The two decades leading up to this year's observance of the 175th anniversary of the Berks County Medical Society were studded with concerns for the changing face of medicine.

In January of 1980, **Dr. Gordon S. Perimutter's** editorial in *The Medical Record* was titled "A New Year's Thought for the 80s." After the previous decade, that seemed to require a high deal of energy related to the political aspects of the medical profession, Perimutter suggested that both physicians and patients involved themselves with the process. "Despite the rhetoric on the floors of Congress and the torrent of

adverse press releases by the federal bureaucracy to the contrary," he wrote, "we still have the best health care system in the world." He advocated patients speaking up to legislators and documenting what they think is *right* about our system.

In the 1990s perhaps the biggest change with the Society was the closing of Medical Hall. After 35 years of meetings, conferences, community events, and social functions, the Walnut Street building required some restoration, and the maintenance costs were rising. In addition, off-street parking was inadequate. Therefore, in 1992, the Society sold the building, which was, quite possibly, its last permanent location. "After comparing costs of a new building and the relatively smaller fixed fees of leasing space in existing office buildings with ample off-street parking, etc.," *The Medical Record* reported to members, "the administrator and Executive Committees advised the membership to go the leasing route."

From 1992, then, to 1997, the Society headquarters was located in the Albright College Rockland Professional Building.

In '97, the Society moved to its new location – the Berks Visiting Nurse Association Building on Berkshire Boulevard, Wyomissing. So, once again, the two organizations are sharing a home.

At the Society now its officers taking it into a new millennium are: President, **Dr. John R. Bower**; President-Elect, **Dr. Pamela M. Ellenberger**; Chairman, Executive Committee, **Dr. John C. Moser**; Treasurer, **Dr. Raymond C. Truex**; Secretary, **Dr. Patti J. Brown**; Immediate Past President, **Dr. William J. West, Jr.**, and Executive Director, **Bruce R. Weidman**.

Today there are 600 Society members, representing 85% of the physicians in the county. It is the leading Society in Pennsylvania based on the percentage of available doctors

that have chosen membership.

As the future of the Berks County Medical Society is contemplated, one might conjecture what **Dr. Isaac Hiester**, the progenitor of the Society in 1824, might be most astounded about if he could return and contemplate today's medical community. Certainly he would be excited about the hundreds of new medical procedures and the thousands of new medicines the past 175 years had brought; the way medical care is paid for today might also surprise him.

But one suspects that Dr. Hiester would be most appreciative of these simple demographic statistics: In 1779, the life expectancy of a person living in the colonies was 35 years; in 1875 that expectancy had climbed to 40 years – only a five-year change in nearly a century. Today, more than 100 years later (when such statistics recognize gender), the life expectancy in Berks for a male is 73 years, and for a female, 79.7 years.

There is a lot of medical history in those numbers. ■

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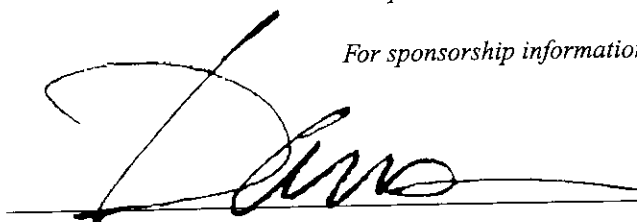
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