

# LOOKING BACK

Milestones that made medicine at Michigan

## Highs and Lows of a Decade as Dean

Cabot was successful, controversial leader prior to his dismissal

**H**ugh Cabot, M.D., occupies a preeminent place in University of Michigan history for his reputation as a superb surgeon and his controversial service as dean of the Medical School from 1921-30. He left the U-M unceremoniously – forced out by an unhappy faculty – but his departure doesn't overshadow his impact as a healer and administrator.

Harvard-educated and considered an innovator in the evolving specialty of urology, Cabot already was a highly regarded surgeon and scientist when he arrived in Ann Arbor in 1919. He began his stay at Michigan as director of the Department of Surgery and was named dean of the Medical School when Victor Vaughan retired in 1921. During Cabot's term, a new hospital was finished, the East Medical Building was constructed, the Department of Biological Chemistry was established, the Department of Physiology was overhauled, and the Department of Surgery was reorganized to include a modern model in which interns and residents continued their training through a structured program.

Cabot is considered a major figure in the formative years of the specialty of urology, and a forward-thinking visionary in medical education, medical practice, medical economics and sex education. He cared deeply about the human side of medicine, writing in 1927, "Nowhere in this curriculum is there any requirement which would particularly qualify the student or interest him in the mental or psychological behavior of mankind."

He also had a keen eye for medical talent. One of his recruits, Charles Huggins, went on to win the Nobel Prize for his work on prostate cancer. Another recruit, Reed Nesbit, became the U-M Medical School's first chief of the Section of Urology in 1930, and stayed on as



Portrait of Hugh Cabot by artist Kevin Gordon

a highly respected professor and department chair until his retirement in 1968.

And there is another reason Cabot's name forever will remain woven into the fabric of U-M lore. Back in 1922, Cabot worked closely with U-M legend Fielding H. Yost to develop a physical conditioning program for the varsity football team. Cabot's efforts with the squad paid off, too. In October of that year, the Wolverines traveled to Columbus, Ohio, and soundly trounced the Buckeyes, 19-0.

A strong man who accomplished much during his deanship, Cabot nevertheless antagonized many senior faculty and created enemies both inside and outside the University

with his views favoring national health insurance, his support for closure of the homeopathic college, and, most importantly, his position advocating full-time faculty appointments to decrease attention paid to private practice at the cost, in Cabot's view, of teaching and hospital responsibilities.

Cabot found himself under pressure from administrators and faculty alike, and in early 1930, U-M President Alexander Ruthven offered him the opportunity to save face and resign. Cabot refused, and a month later he was dismissed as dean by the regents.

The minutes of the regents' meeting on February 7, 1930, state: "Resolved that in the interests of greater harmony in the Medical School, Dr. Cabot is relieved of the duties of Dean of the Medical School and Director of the Department of Surgery, and the President is advised to appoint an executive committee of five to direct the affairs of the School until such time as some other plan is devised."

Cabot left the University and took a position at the Mayo Clinic. Prior to his departure, he told the surgery faculty, "I could capitulate, but I will not. This is an awkward position, one in which I hope none of you will ever be placed. But if you are, however uncomfortable it may be, stick to your principles and don't worry too much about the cost."

There is no record Cabot ever returned to Ann Arbor after the notoriety of his dismissal.

Frederick A. Collier, M.D., took over as chair of the Department of Surgery, and the dean's office was dark from 1930-33, when the newly formed Executive Committee directed the school, a committee which meets to this day with the dean as chair. [m](#)

