

Letters to the Editor

The Work of Udo Wile



Udo Wile

The story of the deans of the Medical School in the Winter 2000 issue is fascinating. As someone particularly interested in medical history, I was struck by the remarks of Dean Victor Vaughan in introducing Udo Wile, the newly appointed head of dermatology: "My Christian friends, students of the medical school, it now becomes my pleasure to introduce a new member of the medical faculty. I shall not ask him to speak. I merely want him to stand up so that you will not mistake him for a freshman." (Wile apparently had been told beforehand that he would be asked to make a speech at this gathering, and was filled with some fear and trepidation.) Vaughan's comments seem to have been a double joke at Wile's expense. One joke is straightforward, the other a bit more subtle, for Wile was one of the first departmental chairs of Jewish background. In his history of the Medical School, Horace Davenport has described the religious, racial and sexual discrimination present in the Medical School and the larger society during the early years of the 20th century.

Issues of ethnic and religious identification aside, Udo Wile (1882-1965) was a fascinating individual. Some aspects of his career should interest readers of *Medicine at Michigan*. His obituary in the *New York Times* noted that "he discovered filterable viruses responsible for two contagious skin diseases (warts and molluscum contagiosum)." In experiments on himself and a few assistants, Wile showed these diseases could be transmitted by intracutaneous injections. Reading these articles many years after the work was done, one may question the objectivity and advisability of experimentation with live viruses on oneself and subordinates.

Even more controversial was some of his work on the disease that interested him most, syphilis. In 1913 he reported the results of brain biopsies on parietic individuals. The biopsies were made by two

German investigators whom Wile had observed on a visit abroad. Live spirochetes were found in the brain tissue. Wile felt the work of these researchers was very important. Although there was no efficacious therapy available for the subjects at that time, there was hope that medical advances would eventually allow treatment before cortical damage became too great. Wile suggested that the presence of living spirochetes in parietic brains disproved the widespread notion that parietics could not transmit syphilis. Wile then biopsied the brains of six parietic patients at Pontiac State Hospital, and found live spirochetes in five. He injected the organisms obtained from these patients into the testicles of rabbits, and found the rabbits were easily infected. When a group named the "Vivisection Investigation League" described Wile's work as nontherapeutic experiments on helpless patients in public institutions, the lay press publicized the issue widely, in a highly emotional manner. The Rockefeller Institute and the AMA felt obliged to reply.

Dean Vaughan justified Wile's research on the basis of potential usefulness to humanity and stated the patients suffered no pain or injury from the brain biopsies. Vaughan said this was only an ethical question of informed consent. The larger issue of America's entry into World War I helped push Wile's work into the background. The AMA developed an official policy on human experimentation 30 years later, in the wake of evidence of Nazi medical experiments. Disclosure of the Tuskegee study of non-treated syphilis came later.

Beyond the historical interest of this story, I hope this note conveys some of the relevance of these issues today, and the potential for future articles in *Medicine at Michigan*.

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Letters



Pharmacology Department faculty in 1951: from left, **Maurice Seevers**, **Maynard Chenoweth**, **Mark Nickerson**, **Lauren Woods**, and **Frederick Shideman**. Third from right is **Dorothy Overbeck**, departmental secretary.

Maurice Seevers' Contributions to Pharmacology

A man who should not be overlooked in the history of the University of Michigan Medical School is Maurice Seevers, M.D., Ph.D., who served as chair of the Department of Pharmacology from 1942 to 1971.

Dr. Seevers' expertise in toxicology was known throughout the U.S., and he was consulted frequently by industrial and drug companies. I worked with him on one situation in which workers of an industrial engineering company were dying of acute massive pulmonary edema. This company was obtaining from a large industrial firm a product which was mixed carbon, sulfuric acid and a catalyst, and quickly troweled on the interior of paper pulp digesters to produce a non-reactive resin. Previously there had been no problem. Within a few weeks we solved the problem using rodent exposure chambers. With the help of the firm we identified the substance producing the pulmonary edema and learned that the firm had changed the catalyst for the preparation of the substance provided to the engineering company. The procedure was promptly changed.

Dr. Seevers added much to the reputation of the University of Michigan by his contributions to the discipline of pharmacology internationally. Because of his

work on opiate addiction he served on the World Health Organization Addiction Committee and in the 1960s was appointed to the President's Commission on Tobacco because of his international reputation as an expert in toxicology. It was that commission that recommended that cigarettes be

labeled as hazardous to human health.

Dr. Seevers believed in helping faculty and graduate students in pharmacology to progress in their research. At times he would be blunt, but his word was good. He expected candor and honesty by all the employees in the department. Yet he was considerate in many ways.

In the 1950s Dr. Seevers participated in a visit by several groups of physicians to Japan sponsored by the American Friends Service Committee. Because he saw the need for special training of Japanese scientists and physicians, he began contacts on his own to bring them to Ann Arbor to study or consult. This activity reflected the generous and thoughtful attitude of Dr. Seevers even though Japan was one of our worst "enemies" in World War II. He was awarded the highest decoration of the Japanese emperor. Because of his international reputation and experience, Dr. Seevers also attracted scientists from many other countries, including Mexico, Turkey, India, Scotland, and Switzerland to Michigan for special training. Faculty and students in the Department of Pharmacology benefited from these interchanges.

For some people, Seevers' standing was tarnished by his role in asking the late Mark Nickerson, associate professor of pharmacology who went on to build a strong pharmacology career in Canada,

to leave the Medical School during the McCarthy era of the 1950s. But it should be remembered that in his time Maurice Seevers, who died in 1977, was a stalwart member of the University community, and a generous, thoughtful and honest individual.

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Remembering a Friend

I was greatly saddened by reading of the death of my friend from the Medical School, Andrew H. Foster (M.D. 1982) in the Fall 1999 issue of *Medicine at Michigan*. Drew and I met each other on the first day of med school



Andrew H. Foster and were close friends the whole way through. We dissected the same cadaver in gross anatomy. I hadn't spoken to Drew for 10 years. I was looking through the magazine hoping to see a picture of Drew as the new chief of thoracic surgery (at the George Washington University Medical Center) and was stunned to read of his passing. Drew was my best friend in med school and I loved him as a brother. I always believed that when work and family allowed room, I would seek him out, but sadly this never came to pass.

I'm adjusting to the reality that my friend is gone and I've written to his widow, Margaret, with the flood of memories of Drew. I tell my patients when things like this happen it's to remind us how precious life is and to teach us to appreciate the loved ones in our life, but it still hurts.

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