

ORIGINS AND GROWTH

The History of the Society for Investigative Dermatology: A Revolution in American Dermatology

Rudolf L. Baer, M.D.

It is a great privilege for me to be able to address you on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Society for Investigative Dermatology, the founding of which is unquestionably one of the most significant events in the history of the specialty of dermatology worldwide. I am undertaking this inspiring task with great excitement and enthusiasm. Having been associated with Dr. Sulzberger before and at the time of the foundation of the society, I had the advantage of hearing about the events leading to its formation, and I was able to participate by contributing [1] to the first issue of *The Journal for Investigative Dermatology* in 1938.

The foundation of the Society for Investigative Dermatology and the decision to publish the Journal, it seems to me, must be seen as part of a revolutionary movement in American dermatology. This complete change and basic reorientation came to fruition in the 1930s. It had already led to the creation of the American Board of Dermatology in 1932 and brought about the foundation of the American Academy of Dermatology in 1938.

To comprehend the use of the word "revolutionary" to characterize the almost simultaneous establishment of these three organizations, the creation of a dermatologic research society being probably the most innovative action taken, one must be aware of the origins of dermatology in our country and of its history in the 19th and early 20th century [2,3].

The beginnings of dermatology in the United States can be traced to a practicing physician, rather than to universities or medical schools and their faculties. It was Henry Duncan Bulkley, who, together with John Watson, started the Broome Street Infirmary in New York City in 1837, after having studied dermatology in Paris in 1831. He conducted not only a clinic but also was the first person in this country to lecture on skin diseases. Next came Noah Worcester, a professor of physical diagnosis and pathology in Cleveland, who published the first treatise on "Diseases of the Skin" in our country in 1845. He previously studied at European universities, mainly in Paris and London. These two men, who were not known to each other, were way ahead of their time.

What William A. Pusey called "the real movement which represents continuing development of American dermatology" [2] started after 1850. Dermatologic teaching programs at academic institutions began with the appointment of James C. White as professor of dermatology at Harvard University in 1871. Then, within a few years, Vermont, Bellevue and New York University in New York City, and Rush Medical College in Chicago established professorships in dermatology [3]. Unfortunately, the number of institutions where dermatology was formally taught grew only gradually for many decades, and dermatology in America remained an almost purely clinical field. The dermatologic faculty members were drawn from among the practicing physicians outside the medical schools.

Department of Dermatology, New York University School of Medicine, New York, New York, U.S.A.

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They devoted part of their time to teaching and patient care and a few of them published texts on skin and venereal diseases. Their original contributions, however, even to clinical dermatology, were modest. Examples are the recognition of some new clinical entities such as dermatitis herpetiformis (Duhring), pityriasis rubra pilaris (White), Fox – Fordyce disease, prurigo ferox (Hyde), and Bowen's disease. Thus, in the United States, the dermatology of that time was quite different from that which existed in the medically leading countries of Western Europe. There, a growing number of medical schools had made dermatology a regular part of their curriculum. Dermatology departments had excellent clinical and laboratory facilities for diagnosis and rooms equipped for specialized treatments. Also, research activities were not unusual.

This explains why so many of the more prominent and important American dermatologists of the 19th and early 20th century found it necessary to supplement their American training with advanced training in Europe. Among them was James C. White, who trained with von Hebra in Vienna. Even five of the nine original board members of this Society had some or all of their dermatologic training in Europe. In the first half of the 19th century the preferred universities were London and Paris; in the middle of the century, mainly under the influence of von Hebra, it was Vienna, and in the last quarter of the 19th and the first part of the 20th century it was mainly Breslau and Hamburg and other German universities.

At a time when for all practical purposes dermatologic research did not exist in our country, some of our European colleagues were making contributions of historic significance. Examples, to name just a few, are the discovery of fungi, causing superficial fungous diseases, by Schönlein, Gruby, and others; identification of the gonococcus by Neisser; identification of *Treponema pallidum* by Schaudinn and Hoffmann; identification of the lepra bacillus by Hansen; development of the patch test by J. Jadassohn; and Unna's discovery of plasma cells.

The description of the basic anatomy, physiology, and biochemistry of the skin and of common and rare skin diseases also came mostly from European and other non-American sources. It is worth noting that even in the field of dermatopathology, Europe was ahead of the United States because of the work of von Hebra, Auspitz, Unna, and Gans. As late as 1926 Gans spent 3 months at the Mayo Clinic to present a series of lectures on dermatohistopathology, which, it has been said, became a subject for examination by the American Board of Dermatology as a result of Gans' visit.

I have deliberately dwelled at some length on the history of American dermatology during its first 100 years, because it is only with this background in mind that one can fully appreciate the idea of starting a society and a journal that would be exclusively devoted to dermatologic investigations. This was revolutionary!

The foundation had been preceded by several years of discussions. Of crucial importance during the preparatory phase was a meeting discussing the creation of a research society in dermatology held on February 7, 1937, in Philadelphia at the office of John H. Stokes (Table I) [4].

It is a great pleasure for us to have two members of this enlightened and enterprising group of men with us here today,

Table I. Those Who Attended the Meeting in Philadelphia on 2/7/37 in the Office of Dr. John H. Stokes

Dr. John H. Stokes
Dr. Joseph V. Klauder
Dr. Sigmund Greenbaum
Dr. Marion B. Sulzberger
Dr. Samuel M. Peck
Dr. Donald M. Pillsbury
Dr. J. Lamar Callaway
Dr. Samuel W. Becker

Table II. The First Board of Directors of the Society for Investigative Dermatology (1937)

George M. MacKee, New York, President
Joseph V. Klauder, Philadelphia, Vice-President
S. W. Becker, Chicago, Secretary
J. Gardner Hopkins, New York, Treasurer
Hamilton Montgomery, Rochester
S. M. Peck, New York
S. Pollitzer, New York
John Stokes, Philadelphia
Marion B. Sulzberger, New York



Figure 1. Dr. J. Lamar Callaway and Dr. Samuel M. Peck at the banquet honoring the 50th anniversary of the founding of the Society for Investigative Dermatology and the JID. Dr. Callaway and Dr. Peck both attended the meeting in Philadelphia on February 7, 1937 in which the creation of the Society and Journal were proposed.

namely, Dr. Callaway and Dr. Peck (Fig 1). At that meeting, publication of the JID was also discussed, and it is of considerable interest to note, in our era of trillion dollar deficits, that Dr. Sulzberger said that \$2,000 would be enough to publish the journal for 1 year. He suggested enlisting the aid of 200 subscribers at \$ 10 each [4] to insure that this sum was available. Even at that the directors of the society had to personally guarantee the solvency of the journal.

Our society was officially founded on June 10, 1937 in Atlantic City, at which time the following people were elected to the first Board of Directors (Table II).

Up to that point, the *Journal of Cutaneous Diseases*, which later became the *Archives of Dermatology and Syphilology*, had been the only specialty journal in our field. I quote from the first issue of the JID: "such a new society and journal, placing special emphasis on investigative work would not only have a place but would be calculated to enable American dermatology and syphilology to

occupy its merited high position among medical specialties. Such a journal would further demonstrate that dermatology is a living integral part of modern medicine, fully aware of the almost unlimited possibilities which the skin because of the unique accessibility and visibility of its tissues, offers for fundamental studies of basic phenomena and general laws." The idea was to assemble the great variety of work done by dermatologists and non-dermatologist scientists, dealing with the skin, its functions and reactions, both physiologic and pathologic under one cover.

I would particularly like to call your attention to the fact that the previously named enlightened, thoughtful, and forward-looking American colleagues, who had these ideas and who decided to translate them into action by forming a society, were all primarily clinicians who were active in teaching institutions. Full-time basic investigators in dermatology, for all practical purposes, did not exist before the 1930s. It is also noteworthy that all this took place before World War II, which, as I shall discuss shortly, profoundly influenced the fate of our specialty in the United States and indeed proved to be a turning point in the course of American dermatology and of financial support for dermatologic research.

It stands to reason that the addition of a new research-oriented society to the existing clinical dermatologic organizations (the American Dermatologic Association, the Section of Dermatology and Syphilology of the American Medical Association, and the then brand-new American Academy of Dermatology) was considered unnecessary by some, and that the publication of a new research-oriented journal, probably because of the feared lack of publishable material for two journals, was considered potentially detrimental to the *Archives of Dermatology and Syphilology*. On the other hand, it seems to me that the almost simultaneous foundation of the Society for Investigative Dermatology and the American Academy of Dermatology in a sense represented much needed complementary developments that led to a highly desirable balance and symmetry in American dermatology. The founding of these two historical societies can be said to have been a major factor in bringing about the striking metamorphosis of dermatology in the United States to where it is today.

I do not intend to provide statistical proof of the remarkable growth of dermatologic research in our country since the foundation of our society, but I want to mention at least a few figures that clarify what has happened. For monetary reasons, and perhaps also the dearth of scientific articles, the JID was first published only every other month. Despite this limitation, the first issue of volume 1 contained only five papers. The fact that two of these originated in Europe suggests that the editor wanted to demonstrate examples of the level of scientific work already underway in some European dermatologic laboratories.

It is of interest to compare the five papers in that issue with the many papers now published monthly in the journal. Also, compare the 14 papers presented at the first meeting of the Society on April

30, 1938 at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York City with the hundreds of papers presented annually by investigators, many from foreign countries, at our recent meetings. The diversity of national origin, of course, illustrates the international nature of today's science in dermatology and in other fields of medicine and biology as well.

Although no pertinent statistics are available, it seems quite obvious that the trend for Americans to train in Europe during the 19th and early 20th century has become reversed since the end of World War II. For some years now, some foreign colleagues have sought supplementary training, particularly research training, in the United States. This is only one of the ways in which the foundation of the Society for Investigative Dermatology has had a pervasive effect on the world of dermatology.

Our society should also receive credit for the fact that in the United States, although there is much room for improvement, creditable fundamental and clinical dermatologic research is now ongoing at a significant number of teaching institutions, as well as at the National Institutes of Health.

What people and events should one credit with bringing about the truly remarkable changes that have taken place since the inception of our society? Three and one-half years after the founding of the Society, the United States became involved in World War II. This had a profound impact on American dermatology in general and on dermatologic research in particular. The war made strikingly evident the shortsightedness of those American medical schools that neglected the teaching of dermatology as part of their regular curriculum. These schools were at fault, when it turned out that most American non-dermatologist military medical officers knew next to nothing about the diagnosis and treatment even of ordinary skin problems, not to speak of skin diseases occurring in our troops stationed in the Far East, the Pacific theatre of operations, North Africa, and other areas.

Still, skin diseases in our troops in these very areas were often the major causes of disability, apart from battle injuries. Under these circumstances our armed services, through the Division of Medical Sciences of the National Research Council, asked our colleagues Dr. Livingood, Dr. Pillsbury, and Dr. Sulzberger to write an illustrated and practical "Manual of Dermatology" [5], which then was distributed to American medical officers in all theatres of war.

As a consequence of these conspicuous deficits in the field of dermatology, the medical establishment in the United States began to take a more serious look at the state of American dermatology in general and the need for teaching medical students something about skin diseases. Part of this new attitude was that, at the urging of Donald Pillsbury, the National Institutes of Health for some years deliberately fostered the development of dermatologic research and the training of young dermatologists interested in academic careers.

Our society has been very fortunate to have presidents, vice-presidents, and secretaries, who, together with the members of the Board of Directors, have continued along the path layed down by its founders 50 years ago. In these activities the secretaries, who are named in Table III, usually carried the major burdens of the work. The editors, who over these 50 years have steadily enhanced the scientific quality of the JID, also deserve special mention here (Table IV). They have done a tremendous job in constantly attempting to improve the quality of the Journal to the point where it now compares favorably with research publications in many other fields.

Time constraints prevent me from listing all those whose names merit particular mention on this joyous occasion. However, I will mention three individuals, who, I believe, each in his own way, had a crucial impact on the progress of investigative dermatology in the early post-World War II in the U.S.A.

The first is Donald Pillsbury (Fig 2). I will quote Stephen Rothman [6], who in 1963 described how he was standing forlornly in the aisle during his first attendance of a meeting of the American Dermatologic Association "like the lonely victim of a shipwreck on a bare island, when suddenly a handsome young man stopped in front of me and asked 'Are you the man who wrote the chemistry chapter in the Jadassohn Handbuch?' And when I said 'yes', he approvingly

Table III. Society for Investigative Dermatology Secretaries – Treasurers

Samuel M. Becker, Sr., 1938–1939

J. Gardner Hopkins, 1939–1947

Samuel M. Peck, 1947–1949

Herman Beerman, 1949–1965

George W. Hambrick, Jr., 1965–1969

John S. Strauss, 1969–1974

W. Mitchell Sams, Jr., 1974–1979

Kirk D. Wuepper, 1979–1984

Ervin H. Epstein, Jr., 1984–present

Table IV. Journal of Investigative Dermatology Editors

Marion B. Sulzberger, 1938–1948

Naomi M. Kanof, 1948–1967

Richard B. Stoughton, 1967–1972

Irwin M. Freedberg, 1972–1977

Ruth K. Freinkel, 1977–1982

Howard P. Baden, 1982–1987

David A. Norris, 1987–present

shook my hands. I could not have felt better if the archangel Gabriel had flown down from heaven to let me know that he had read the chapter I was so proud of. The angel was of course Donald Pillsbury, and it was not an accident that he knew of those recent attempts in Europe to do physiological and biological laboratory work with the purpose of establishing basic research in dermatology." Rothman goes on to describe Pillsbury as the leader of American dermatology, both in its research and clinical aspects and states that Pillsbury raised the prestige of our specialty in the scientific world, with the government, and in the opinion of the public more than any other single individual.

The second giant in this trio was Stephen Rothman (Fig 3). His pupil, Allan L. Lorincz, describes him as follows [7]: "Dr. Rothman was a colorful and remarkable man whose keenly sharp mind was continually delighted and nourished by the phenomenal scientific renaissance taking place during his lifetime. He was not only a brilliant creative scientist and critical disciplined thinker, but he also had a much broader wisdom which properly evaluated and ranged over all that life could offer. Moreover, he was unusually endowed with those special qualities of spirit which elevate humanity; open forthrightness, vigorous enthusiasm, perceptive kindness and understanding, light-hearted wit and humor, true humility and a sensitive appreciation of all that was fine, excellent and beautiful."

The third member of this remarkable group of men was Marion Sulzberger (1895–1983). After graduating from medical school in Switzerland, he took dermatologic training, including research training, under J. Jadassohn and Bruno Bloch. After his return to the United States in 1929 he was not hesitant to tell his colleagues that American dermatology lacked in scientific research. At the same time he himself engaged in fundamental immunologic investigations. "His most significant accomplishment was that he had the foresight and possessed the leadership to help guide American dermatology from a 100-year largely morphologic and clinical



Figure 2. Donald M. Pillsbury, M.D. (1902–1980). The photograph is taken from the Festschrift honoring Dr Pillsbury (*J Invest Dermatol* 42:1–172, 1964).



Figure 3. Stephen Rothman, M.D. (1894–1963). The photograph is from the Festschrift honoring Dr. Rothman (*J Invest Dermatol* 31:1–90, 1958).

period into its modern era, in which fundamental research and knowledge form the underpinning for clinical dermatology" [8].

Major credit must also go to the many generations of American academic dermatologists, who, during these past 50 years have steadfastly attempted to raise the level of dermatologic research in this country qualitatively and quantitatively to a point where the standing of our specialty in the American medical community has greatly improved. Still, much more needs to be done. Little or no progress has been made in some important segments of our field. A glaring example is the failure to better control itching, the one symptom that is unique to the skin.

We must also recognize the enlightened attitude of our practicing colleagues, who joined our Society from the beginning. Without their financial contributions and encouraging attitude the JID could not have succeeded. They realized that high quality fundamental and clinical research was in the best interests of their patients and that without such research dermatology could not be a respectable specialty, functioning in the mainstream of medicine.

The inclusion in 1986 of "skin diseases" in the name of the National Institute for Arthritis, Musculoskeletal Diseases, and Skin Diseases is a welcome official recognition of the need for research in dermatology. It was the outcome of the combined efforts of the academic group and the American Academy of Dermatology.

All members of the Society for Investigative Dermatology have good reasons to be proud and to celebrate our 50th anniversary, but

for those of us, like me, who have had the privilege of living through the period of foundation of our Society and through these 50 years of marvelous developments, this anniversary is a truly moving and thrilling experience. Happy birthday!

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