

ICONS OF DENTISTRY: DR LEON EISENBUD

A. Norman Cranin

Dentistry has a long, often well documented history. Evidence of tooth pullings has been discovered in crude carvings on the walls of caves that are over 10,000 years old. The ancient Egyptians, the Athenians, and the early inhabitants of Rome required oral health care; in addition to tooth extractions, they underwent tumor removal, tamponade for hemorrhage, reduction of jaw fractures with gold wire ligatures, cautery using white hot platinum loops, and an additional variety of remedies and nostrums. Pain relief was offered, with courses of treatment as varied as postural change, alteration of ambient temperature, and vegetable and organic medicines in poultices or via oral and rectal routes. Through the centuries, great surgeons and physicians introduced various methods of treatment: Hippocrates codified ethical standards; Maimonides established pragmatic rules for physicians; LeFort categorized facial fractures; Pasteur clarified the need for sterilization; Semmelweis standardized antiseptic conditions in the operating theater; Morton and Wells discovered safer methods of analgesia; Freud explored the therapeutic uses of narcotics; Roentgen championed X-ray imaging; Curie pioneered the use of chemotherapy; and Barton and Nightingale were models of empathy and patient care.

In more recent times, we have profited from the genius of Watson and Crick (DNA); Fleming (penicillin); Venable and Stuck (Chrome-cobalt – molybdenum alloy); Gershkoff and Goldberg (the subperiosteal implant); Chercheve, Branemark, Linkow, Misch, Tatum, and Niznick (innovative root forms, titanium and its alloys, and sinus floor grafting). The 20th century has brought to us phenomenal imaging, breathtaking intrauterine fetal surgery, wildly promising stem cell research, and astonishing CAD/CAM techniques. We've had great teachers and clinicians who have introduced us to new forms of therapy and advanced methods, including the role of the hemidesmosomes, the essential elements of bone grafting, the importance of microscopic analysis, and the benefits to patients of physical diagnosis by their dentists.

To recognize and celebrate some of my heroes' contributions to the health and well-being of humankind, editorials will occasionally appear on these pages that explore their various contributions.

I was 23 at the time of my graduation from the NYU College of Dentistry in late June of 1951. I felt intimidated and inexperienced. My head was spinning with awe and confusion. The oral surgery clinic nurse, Lorraine J. Frattini, was smart enough to have been a practicing maxillofacial surgeon, a cardiologist, a radiologist, and a pediatrician all at the same time, but she was also an impatient, intolerant, foxy dame. She took us on a tour of the wards (5 of them, 40 patients on each). I saw patients in traction, patients with

tracheostomies, patients with a rainbow of serious illnesses: pallid, cyanotic, jaundiced, and florid. Some had exophthalmoses, and many had dentures in glass jars on their bedside tables. I was in a panicked state when I felt a gentle hand on my shoulder and a soft, reassuring voice next to my ear.

"I'm Dr Eisenbud," he said. "I was exactly in your shoes about 10 years ago. Come with me; we'll go visit my dad who's a patient on Ward H."

Gratefully, I followed him to his father's bedside, one flight up.

A. Norman Cranin, DDS, DEng,
is Editor-in-Chief of the
Journal of Oral Implantology.

Dr Eisenbud Sr was the former medical director of one of New York's largest and most famous institutions, Harlem Hospital. And now, in a state of seriously declining health, it was evident to even a dope like me that he had entered a terminal situation. I stood there dumbstruck, listening to how an adoring son soothed and comforted his father. So that neither would see the tears running down my cheeks, I fled.

This first incident with Dr Eisenbud (I didn't call him Leon until only about 10 years ago) portended what I and my three fellow interns, Wally, Stan, and Dave, were going to experience with this star attending. His formal lectures and informal chairside and bedside talks were filled with historical footnotes, arcane diagnostic signs, rare symptoms, and practical manual advice. His intellectuality was equaled by his matchless digital dexterity. He taught us about bougies, salivary glands, the effective use of the earliest steroids, and the benefits and risks of antimetabolites and antibiotics. My rounds and OR experience with him laid the groundwork that prepared me for the remainder of my professional life. This first year flew by,

and at the beginning of the second, my idol was selected (above many others) by Long Island Jewish Hospital (LIJ) to establish, organize, and conduct what was to become undeniably the best dental service in any hospital in the United States. It didn't take long for his fame to spread. His department became a model for most others all over the world. He had become a much-demanded invited speaker and subsequently a leader of the most prestigious national dental and hospital organizations.

In the midst of the growth of dental residencies, his busy private practice, and his arduous lecturing schedule, he found time to attend the oral pathology lab at Mount Sinai under the aegis of Professor Lester Cahn, and when he felt ready, he went on to start an even better one at LIJ. Many of our best oral pathologists, stomatologists, and teachers were produced from that program.

His family—wife Naida, daughter Barbara, and son Bob—was not neglected, despite his grinding schedule. Naida, a nurse, retired to raise the kids and became a sensational horticulturist. People came from near and far to look at her

gardens and, when she wasn't looking, to snip buds.

Upon retirement from his hospital duties, Leon and Naida moved to Bonita Springs in Southwest Florida where, in addition to active fishing (he always used nonbarbed hooks and threw each fish back) and enthusiastic teaching, they devoted themselves to the Barefoot Beach Preserve, grew exquisite, rare flowers, protected migrating tortoises, and cultivated exotic butterflies. Many of his former students sought him to make diagnoses that had defied the diagnostic skills of their local pathologists. The living Eisenbud shrine was visited by hundreds of his former students and current admirers.

Leon died this past September. He was one of the two men who most influenced and guided my personal and professional life. He shed his light on so many things, meant so much to so many people, and shared his brilliance unselfishly and without discrimination. I and the myriad others whom Dr Eisenbud touched and renewed will miss him dearly. The loss to all who knew him personally, and to humanity itself, is incalculable.