

# Bellevue: Three Centuries of Medicine and Mayhem at America's Most Storied Hospital

By David M. Oshinsky. New York, Doubleday, 2016. Pages: 372. Price: \$18.99 (hardcover); \$7.99 (ebook); \$15.99 (paperback).

Bellevue is just a public hospital in New York City. Why write a review about a 7-yr-old, 372-page book of adventures at Bellevue?

Perhaps the fact that Bellevue has 912 acute care beds and is 14th on the list of America's largest public hospitals<sup>1</sup> justifies a look at this institution. Perhaps the fact that Bellevue has provided sustained care of *all patients* since opening in the early 1730s warrants its study.

Why? Because Bellevue employed innovations that were firsts for American Hospitals, including opening a maternity ward, organizing a civilian ambulance service, developing a nursing school, creating a medical photography department, crafting public health standards, and inaugurating the field of forensic medicine. Why? Because Bellevue compassionately cared for psychologically disadvantaged patients including famous figures such as O. Henry, Eugene O'Neill, Norman Mailer, and Stephen Foster and developed new treatments for them like electroconvulsive therapy. This book fleshes out the stories of these important innovations and noteworthy individuals.

Perhaps the constant tension—pushes and pulls—between public and private hospitals in New York City vying for limited sources of dollars to fund medical care provides lessons for current allocation of healthcare across the entire United States.

Perhaps the plethora of notable people in Bellevue's history and their related milestones are medical role models a reader can emulate. Bellevue's paragons included William Welch (1850–1934) and William Halsted (1852–1922), both of whom investigated and championed the importance of germ theory of disease; Walter Reed (1851–1902) and William Gorgas (1854–1920), both of whom confirmed Yellow Fever transmission *via* mosquito; Charles Leale (1842–1932), Frank Hamilton (1813–1886), and Joseph Bryant (1845–1914), all of whom were principal physicians to American Presidents: Lincoln, Garfield, and Cleveland, respectively; and Andre' Cournand (1895–1988) and Dickinson Richards (1895–1973) both of whom received the Nobel Prize in Medicine (1956) for the development of cardiac catheterization.

Perhaps the sentinel place Bellevue held in the education of American physicians starting in 1787 energizes a review

of the value of that educational process.<sup>2</sup> Oliver Wendell Holmes expressed this important fact about Bellevue, among many public teaching hospitals, in his valedictory address to the graduating class of Bellevue Hospital College in 1871:

*“The young [wo]man is exceptionally fortunate who enjoys the intimacy of such a teacher. And it must be confessed that the great hospitals, infirmaries and dispensaries of large cities, where men of well-sifted reputations are in constant attendance, are the true centers of medical education.”*<sup>2,3</sup>

Perhaps recounting public health responses from Bellevue to American pandemics of yellow fever, cholera, typhus, tuberculosis, flu, AIDS, Ebola, and Covid and environmental disasters of hurricanes Katrina, Irene, and Sandy teach valuable lessons that will result in less consequential events in the future.

Perhaps, as anesthesiologists, knowing that Emery A. Rovenstine (1895–1960), one of the many students of Ralph Waters (1883–1979), became the Chair of Bellevue's Department of Anesthesiology in 1935 is sufficient in and of itself to spark interest in learning about Bellevue, the arena in which Rovenstine molded the future of our specialty's practitioners and teachers.

If learning details about some or all the reasons for interest in the story of Bellevue listed above has whet your appetite, David Oshinsky's book, “Bellevue: Three Centuries of Medicine and Mayhem at America's Most Storied Hospital” will satiate your craving. Oshinsky is the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of “Polio: An American Story,” Oxford Press, 2005. The book about Bellevue offers quality, detail, and a pleasurable writing style. The story that Oshinsky tells is very valuable for its multiple benefits. For one, this book describes the varied tale of this New York legend. For another, it tells stories of all aspects of healthcare in New York City that are analogous to U.S. healthcare then and now, both geographically and chronologically. Reading this tome enables a broad brush and specifically detailed view of healthcare.

To spark your interest, I recommend you view a CBS News Sunday morning report<sup>4</sup> from March 2020, during which a slightly less than 8-min video provides a condensed

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version of Oshinsky's story. Then, snuggle up to the book itself to learn and enjoy!

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