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Seale Harris

1870-1957

Leon S. Smelo, M.D., Birmingham

Almost a century has gone by since the War between the States, and one by one the medical leaders who attained eminence during the Reconstruction Era have passed away. Most recent of these was Seale Harris, who died on May 16, 1957, of a cerebral vascular lesion three days after his eighty-seventh birthday. Seale Harris had the distinctive qualities of the great physicians of his period—doctor, teacher, medical investigator and writer. Dr. Harris combined a deep concern for the health needs of each patient with a penetrating insight into the disturbances of disease. He blended what today is called psychosomatic and scientific medicine. He sought always to disseminate knowledge as a teacher and writer. An outstanding internist, he was particularly recognized for his therapy of diabetes mellitus and his discovery of its antithesis—hyperinsulinism.

Dr. Harris did more than treat patients well. He had a deep desire to better medical practice in all its phases. He engaged in a never-ending education of physicians in the fundamentals of physiology and biochemistry. In many talks to the public he advocated the free choice of one's physician to replace company-paid doctors. He strongly emphasized sound nutrition and strongly denounced the use of alcohol. Unshakable in his convictions, Seale Harris promulgated his beliefs forcefully and fearlessly, and lived to see them gain acceptance.

Dr. Harris was proud of his forebears. Descended from sturdy Scotch-Irish planters and soldiers, Seale Harris' father was a country surgeon in northwest Georgia, with a great love for classic literature and music. His mother was valedictorian of her class at college and had a serene and happy disposition. From these parents, whose wealth perished with the ante-

bellum South, came five sons who achieved distinguished careers respectively as the leading educator of Georgia; as Adjutant General of the Army during World War I; as United States Senator from Georgia for three terms; as career officer of the United States Army, and as an eminent physician.

With the financial aid of his elder brothers, and by his earnings carrying the rod for the crew that surveyed the route of the Seaboard Railroad from Rome, Georgia, to Chattanooga, Seale Harris obtained his Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Georgia and his M.D. from the University of Virginia in 1894. As a medical student, Harris occupied the dormitory room earlier used by Edgar Allen Poe.

After graduation, Harris engaged in general practice with his uncle in Union Springs, Alabama, from 1894 to 1906. There he also served as County Health Officer. In 1897 he married Stella Rainer, daughter of the town's banker. To them were born Josephine Harris Keegan and Seale Harris, Jr. His son who was associated with his father in practice died in 1944 in Australia while in military service.

In the agricultural community of southeastern Alabama, Seale Harris established a reputation for diagnostic and professional acumen. In 1906 he became Professor of the Practice of Medicine of the University of Alabama at Mobile. He prepared for this appointment by a year of postgraduate work at Johns Hopkins University, the Polyclinic Hospital in New York, and various medical centers in France and Germany. Dr. Harris held this Professorship until 1913 when the demands of practice and his duties as Secretary-Treasurer of the Southern Medical Association and Editor of the

Southern Medical Journal forced his resignation.

In 1906 The Southern Medical Society was organized. Dr. Harris became its Secretary-Treasurer and the Editor of its Journal. Dr. Harris in 1912 selected Mr. C. P. Loranz as Business Manager. Under their guidance from 1912 to 1921 both the Society and Journal prospered and grew steadily in size and influence.

The Southern Medical Journal has served as the voice of the Southern Medical Association in stimulating the understanding and practice of scientific medicine. During a decade under his editorial leadership the Journal progressed from an obscure regional publication to one of national and international stature. In 1921 the Association recognized the achievements of its Editor by electing him to its presidency. In 1956 the Association celebrated its Golden Anniversary. On that occasion the Society awarded a Golden Key to Dr. Harris for his devoted services in establishing the eminent position of the Society as one of the most influential and important in the United States.

With his familial military background, it was inevitable that World War I would draw Seale Harris into service. Initially placed in charge of work on gastrointestinal diseases, he was later drafted by General Pershing to serve in Paris as Editor of *War Medicine*, the research organ of the A.E.F. He also wrote the Gastroenterological Section of the *Medical History of the World War*. Upon retiring from military service in 1920, Dr. Harris was elevated to Colonel in the Medical Reserve Corps.

In 1922, when Banting and Best announced the isolation of insulin, Harris went to Toronto to learn about the new lifesaving agent. This trip had three significant consequences: (1) Drs. Banting and Harris became firm friends; the latter secured much of the data and insight utilized later in his biography of the discoverer of insulin. (2) Dr. Harris gave a course on insulin in 1924 at Birmingham. This was attended by physicians from Virginia, Florida, Georgia, Tennessee, Mississippi and Alabama. (3) The observations made on the effects of excessive administration of insulin initiated the investigations which culminated in his description of hyperinsulinism.

Indeed, while in Toronto, Dr. Harris discussed with Dr. Banting the theoretical possibility of excessive insulin secretion. Harris recalled patients who several hours after meals exhibited weakness, pallor, perspiration, tremor and faintness—typical symptoms of insulin hypoglycemia. On his return from Birmingham, Dr. Harris obtained from his records the names of patients with such symptoms who were then studied further. At

the meeting of the American Medical Association in 1924, he read a paper entitled "Hyperinsulinism and Dysinsulinism." He cited five patients in whom the above-described symptoms were associated with a blood sugar under 70 mg. per cent and concluded that this was caused by an excessive endogenous secretion of insulin, i.e., hyperinsulinism. In 1937 Dr. Allen Whipple offered his triad of diagnostic criteria to differentiate between the relatively infrequent surgical hyperinsulinism due to islet-cell neoplasms or hyperplasia, and the relatively frequent hyperinsulinism of functional etiology first described by his friend, Seale Harris. After the initial report in 1924 on hyperinsulinism, Dr. Harris in subsequent publications stressed the frequency with which it simulated and was misdiagnosed as a neuropsychiatric disorder.

Dr. Harris placed emphasis upon diet in the management of diabetes mellitus and functional hyperinsulinism. In the 1920's, in order to carry out such therapy, he found it necessary to establish his own Dietetic Institute, which later developed into the Gorgas Hospital. These institutions contributed greatly to physician-patient education in diabetes, hyperinsulinism, gastrointestinal and nutritional diseases but the heavy losses resulting from their maintenance during the depression years wiped out Dr. Harris' personal fortune. These losses ultimately cost him the hospital, but demonstrated his inviolate character. Regardless of legalities, he repaid physician friends their full investments.

During his lifetime Dr. Seale Harris was accorded many richly earned rewards. In 1940 the Medical Association of Alabama bestowed a special award for his discovery of hyperinsulinism. In 1948 and 1949 honorary memberships in Phi Beta Kappa and Sigma Xi were granted. In 1948 also, the first camp for diabetic children south of the Mason-Dixon line was founded and named in his honor. In 1949 he was recipient of the Distinguished Service Award of the American Medical Association and the Research Medal of the Southern Medical Association in recognition of his pioneer description of hyperinsulinism and his achievements in the fields of diabetes mellitus and nutrition. In 1949 he became one of the few out-of-state physicians elected to its Fifty-Year Club by the Mississippi State Medical Society. In 1950 the University of Alabama conferred a Doctorate of Laws; in 1951 the Medical College of Alabama, an honorary membership in Alpha Omega Alpha. In 1951 the University of Virginia Alumni Association designated him a member of the Thomas Jefferson Society of Patriarchs for more than fifty years of superlative service.

These many awards attested to a remarkable medical career and affectionate esteem for a man in his seventies. They did not signal the onset of retirement, as might be expected, but, rather, marked the inauguration of the career of an author. In 1946 Dr. Harris published *Banting's Miracle*, a glowing tribute to a friend and one of the great benefactors of our time. In 1950 he wrote *Woman's Surgeon: The Life Story of J. Marion Sims*. This biography was dedicated to Dr. Charles Hooks Harris, father of Seale, a disciple of Marion Sims, and responsible for his son's lifelong admiration of the founder of modern gynecology. In 1952 Dr. Harris produced his final work, a political treatise: *Death of*

the National Democratic Party. Another work never completed because of a succession of mishaps and illnesses was: *Octogenarians, Nonagenarians and Centenarians Whom I Have Known*.

This talented and beloved physician died at the home of his daughter, Mrs. Josephine Harris Keegan, on March 16, 1957. It is fitting to repeat a sentiment editorially expressed in the *Southern Medical Journal* of December 1921 when Seale Harris assumed the presidency of the Southern Medical Association: "He is of keen mind, thorough education, scholarly attainments, rare culture, great breadth of vision, and with it all a most human personality."

CORRESPONDENCE

To the Editor:

The letter appearing in the July-August 1957 issue of DIABETES written by Dr. Joslin discussing the association of trauma with diabetes should be of tremendous interest to every practicing physician especially if he is called upon to render a professional opinion as to causal relationship.

Dr. Joslin gives his own personal experience citing uncontroversial data covering a period of over sixty years of clinical observations including case records of 49,000 patients studied in his clinic together with a terse statement of material on the subject covering two world wars, and reported experiences of his intimate colleagues in the Boston area as well as in Europe.

The early and continued animal studies of Long, Lukens, Young, Houssay, Ingle and many others on the relationship of other glands of internal secretion to diabetes mellitus with special reference to the anterior pituitary and the adrenal cortex; the use of certain glucogenic corticoids producing so-called "steroid diabetes" in selected experimental animals; and probably more recent observations and reports by Conn and others on the production of hyperglycemia in man by the use of corticotrophic substances, have induced some to feel that stressful situations resulting from trauma, and/or trauma alone can produce diabetes mellitus in man. Some have used the terminology "stress diabetes" as synonymous with so-called "steroid diabetes" and the clinical entity diabetes mellitus in man.

Despite the profound, exciting and enlightening experimental observations of the past fifteen to twenty years, this writer, for the present, agrees with Dr. Joslin

that trauma and the stressful situations frequently attendant thereto do not cause diabetes mellitus in man. Years of clinical observation confirm this position and there is insufficient experimental or clinical data to refute it.

As to the future, I shall be sincerely and keenly alert to all proven acceptable data confirming or disproving my present belief.

The question of trauma and stress as etiological factors while constituting a very small portion of the problem of diabetes as a whole, looms large and assumes considerable importance when the physician is called upon to render an opinion one way or the other, especially in a court of law. In the past several years I have been asked to review three such cases and give my opinion in three different cities. The legal implications are extensive and far-reaching and at times, appalling. An exhaustive review of the literature on the subject is intensely interesting and one is lead to believe that some authors report the findings and statements of others without careful analysis and probably without integrating their own records and observations. As a result of my own recent experiences, I find myself again in agreement with Dr. Joslin and feel obligated to address this communication in the interest of the large segment of the future diabetic population of our country, "if it were considered likely that they would become diabetic if they underwent an injury."

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To the Editor:

Your recent article on Frederick William Pavy (DIABETES, November-December, 1956) provided a valuable appraisal of his contribution to medicine, particularly in