

EDITORIAL

HISTORICAL FOOTPRINTS: MJM PAST AND PRESENT



There has been a long tradition in the history of medicine to cement one's legacy by naming some anatomic structure, disease process, or new treatment after oneself; although to be fair, sometimes the naming was done posthumously by a third party. Either way, the net result has been a one-to-one association between researcher and discovery that has become ingrained into our collective consciousness. Of course, if things were that simplistic then the sheer number of medical eponyms that bear Virchow's name would probably lead us to believe that he

was the most industrious man in the history of western medicine. The reality though, is that every great scientific discovery is the product of entire teams of researchers that rarely get their names mentioned in textbooks. So it would be unfair of us to talk of the Calvin cycle and credit its discovery to Melvin Calvin without at least giving a passing nod to Andrew Benson who did a considerable portion of the work while on Calvin's team. Also, while Denis Burkitt described the new form of lymphoma that would come to bear his name, it was Michael Epstein, Yvonne Barr, and Burt Achong that actually isolated the causative virus. Unfortunately, the naming of the Epstein-Barr virus pays little tribute to the third member of this triad.

This tirade against the injustices of historical nomenclature has its origins in the unlikely developments stemming from the Faculty of Medicine's annual newsletter. The newsletter carried an article about the MJM and its growing readership that provoked a rather surprising response. Two of our noted alumni, Dr. Charlotte Ferencz and Dr. William Gibson, wrote to us to point out that the article did little to recognise the previous incarnation of our medical journal. It is an accusation we readily acknowledge. In fact, our predecessor publication bore the slightly different name "McGill Medical Journal" and was first published in 1931. Its origins were far older than we had originally realised and its longevity was just as surprising. Its final issue, published in 1981 marked the end of its half-century run. However, the discoveries did not end there. It was three hard-working students, from the illustrious Class

of '32, that originally founded the McGill Medical Journal. They were Clement Clay, James Gray and Colin McLeod. It was the last name that sparked the greatest amount of interest.

McLeod graduated from McGill in 1932 and spent the next two years as a resident at the Montreal General Hospital, before moving to New York and accepting a position at the Rockefeller Institute Hospital. It was then that he began to work with his fellow Canadian-in-exile Oswald Avery. The result of that partnership was the groundbreaking 1944 paper "Studies of the Chemical Nature of the Substance Inducing Transformation of Pneumococcal Types. Induction of Transformation by a Deoxyribonucleic Acid Fraction Isolated from *Pneumococcus* Type III" by Avery, McLeod, and McCarty. The paper challenged the belief that genetic material was carried by proteins and proposed that it was in fact transmitted by these so-called "nucleic acids." Though McLeod did much of the actual physical work, he still had to play second fiddle to the more senior Avery who was director of the laboratory. However, the point became mute after Watson and Crick published their 1953 paper on the double helix (which incidentally never cited the work of Avery and McLeod). The magnitude of the publicity surrounding the double helix eclipsed the work done at the Rockefeller Institute, forever denying Avery and MacLeod a much-deserved Nobel Prize. In the 50th anniversary edition of *Nature* (vol. 421, no. 6921, p. 406, 23 January 2003), an editorial note called the omission "an oversight that, to this day, still puzzles."

So what is to be done with all these historical oversights? Perhaps, very little can be done. A drastic re-write of medical history would be cumbersome and serve no real purpose. All we can do is continue with the basic principles that have guided scientific researchers for the greater part of modern history. We provide a forum for scientific discussion and let everyone submit their papers, hypotheses, theories, and suspicions. There will be the inevitable amount of retractions, confusion, disputes, and competing claims over some work. We can only hope history will sort it out and give us some final pronouncement of who, if anyone, was ultimately correct. Moreover, in this tempest of scientific publication, and in a world where big discoveries increasingly seem to require big research budgets, student research can often get lost in the whirlwind. Fortunately, there is a place where student research is always welcome. It is a place where great careers can begin, and it is place where researchers that will change the course of history can get their feet wet. That place is here at the MJM, and we are very proud of it.

REFERENCES

1. McCarty, M. Discovering genes are made of DNA. *Nature* 2003; 421: 406.

Kathy Han, B.Sc. (Hon.), M.D.C.M. (2006) and **Christopher Labos**, M.D. C.M. (2006) are the eighth Editors-in-Chiefs of the MJM. Kathy Han completed her B.Sc. in Immunology at the University of Toronto. For the past four years, she has been actively involved in cancer research, which has led to publications in *Nature Medicine* and *Molecular Cancer Research*. Christopher Labos has been awarded the Shirley Nancy Edman Prize for Physiology and earned the Ivan Racheff Scholarship for his research in the surgical treatment of cardiac tamponade.