



Was medical student Pratt a diagnostic wizard? Alfred Blalock didn't think so.

### A Hopkins Memory: The Great Diagnosis

During my third-year surgery rotation in the 1940s, there were weekly conferences with Dr. (Alfred) Blalock. These sessions provided many a tense moment for the students. A patient presented at one such meeting had vomiting, crampy abdominal pain and moderate distension, and also complained of pain radiating down the medial aspects of one leg.

During the discussion, Dr. Blalock led our group of students to the logical conclusion that the patient probably had partial intestinal obstruction. As the session was concluding, he commented that he couldn't say what might be causing this problem. Luckily for me, I had been reading about hernias that week and had seen the statement that herniation into the obturator foramen could press on the adjacent nerve and produce pain radiating to the knee. I proposed that the patient might have an obturator hernia.

Christmas vacation began the next day, but I passed this up to stay as a substitute intern on the Nose and Throat Service. A couple of days later, I heard myself paged on the Hospital intercom to come promptly to one of the operating rooms. I thought: "My gosh, what have I forgotten to do now?"

When I got to the room, Dr. Blalock very happily showed me his findings in that patient. She did indeed have an obturator hernia, and he demonstrated the proximal dilated ileum, and the crease from the obturator membrane which had trapped about half the circumference. He had sutured the membrane down so the hernia could not recur. As I was leaving the room, I realized that I had not thanked Dr. Blalock for thinking of me during the operation. So I paused, waiting for an opportunity.

Just then, Dr. Hugh (Hampton) Young strolled into the room on his customary trip through the surgery suite and Dr. Blalock demonstrated the case to him. He also noted that "one of the medical students diagnosed the case preoperatively."

Dr. Young said, "My, that student must be a genius!"

The response, which I can quote because I wrote it in a letter to my Yankee parents in Maine, was, "Nao, he's naughhht a genius. He hasn't known the answers to several questions that he reallly should have known."

Needless to say, I left the room quietly and waited a few days before tell-

ing Dr. Blalock how much I appreciated his thoughtfulness in calling me to visit the operation.

The case was later presented at a surgery grand rounds, where credit was again given for my unexpected diagnostic prowess.

*Philip C. Pratt, M.D.  
Class of 1944  
Durham, N.C.*

*HMN has a standing invitation to readers: Do you have a favorite Hopkins memory? Please send it in.*

### Please get Hopkins off the random testing bandwagon. I do not wish to live in a police state.

#### The Random Drug-Testing Bandwagon

I am very disappointed to learn of Hopkins' new random drug-testing policy at the Hospital. It is a violation of human, if not constitutional, rights, to test people for illicit drugs without *probable cause* for suspicion of drug abuse or impairment on the job. Hopkins would not sanction random searches of people's homes for evidence of criminal activity. The human body should be no less sacred.

Please get Hopkins off the random testing bandwagon. I do not wish to live in a police state. To express my disapproval, I have reduced my annual contribution to Hopkins.

*Evan J. Samett, M.D.  
Fellow in Radiology, 1984  
Chicago*

*The drug-testing policy caught us between issues and is covered on page 7.*

#### Mencken the Welch-Basher

The Spring 1990 issue of HMN ("Unlocking the Body's Secrets," on autopsy) states that Dr. William H. Welch did the first 300 autopsies at Hopkins.

But in his recently published diary, H.L. Mencken wrote that Welch did only two autopsies during his whole career at Hopkins.

Could you please clarify this for me?

*Steven Lehrer, M.D.  
Class of 1969  
New York City*

*An entry from Mencken's diary, sent by Lehrer, reads:*

"Raymond Pearl tells me that he hears from W.G. MacCallum, head of the department of pathology at the Johns Hopkins, that the records of the hospital show only two autopsies by William H. Welch during the whole of his career there." Mencken goes on to editorialize: "This news is surely not surprising. Welch was one of the laziest men ever heard of, and even in his earliest days at the Hopkins he spent most of his time trying to dodge work . . . His so-called scientific achievements were of the most meagre (sic). He discovered two bacilli, but in those days any one with a microscope could discover one at will."

*In answer to this question, there's not much to say except that we verified our information about the 300 autopsies with Department of Pathology records. On the other hand, H.L. Mencken was not one to let facts stand in the way of a good story.*

*We welcome your letters. Write: Editor, Janet Farrar Worthington, Hopkins Medical News, 550 N. Broadway, 11th Floor, Baltimore, Md., 21205.*