

In Memoriam

JOHN R. SCHENKEN, M.D.

(1905–1982)

JOHN RUDOLPH SCHENKEN died on March 6, 1982. His death brought to a close one of the most distinguished careers in American Pathology. It is difficult to find a pathologist in the United States who does not recognize the name Rudy Schenken, and a majority of them knew him personally.

Doctor Schenken was born in the small German community of Keystone, Iowa, on January 6, 1905. He was awarded a Bachelor of Science degree from the University of Iowa in 1926, and his M.D. degree from the same institution in 1928. After a rotating internship at Montreal General Hospital, he became a resident in pathology and bacteriology at the University of Iowa in 1929 under the direction of Dr. G. H. Hansmann.

During his residency, he began investigative studies which continued throughout his professional life. One of the first projects, in collaboration with Doctor Hansmann, resulted in the isolation of the causative agent of histoplasmosis.

On completion of his residency and after a fellowship in pathologic chemistry at Henry Ford Hospital, he began his academic career as an instructor in pathology at Georgetown University. The following year, he moved to New Orleans as an assistant professor in the department of pathology and bacteriology of Louisiana State University. Five years later, he was appointed professor and head of this department. It was during this period that he refined the superb teaching methods which are so well-known and appreciated by his former students and residents. He also continued his investigative work. This included a study of the effects of stilbestrol in prostatic cancer, the relationship of hypertension to fatal gastrointestinal hemorrhage from peptic ulcer, and the relationship of cystic disease to cancer of the breast.

In 1945, Doctor Schenken moved to Omaha, Nebraska, to become Pathologist and Director of Laboratories at Nebraska Methodist Hospital and, in 1948, Childrens Memorial Hospital. He had entered the private practice of pathology because of an effort by some of the political leaders in Louisiana to politicize the medical school, culminating in their firing the dean. Most of the department chairmen at Louisiana State University, Doctor Schenken among them, resigned in protest.

Doctor Schenken's interest in teaching continued. He promptly initiated a strong residency program in pathology based in his private hospitals. In 1954, he responded to the dean's call and became chairman of the Department of Pathology at the University of Nebraska College of Medicine, while continuing to practice at Nebraska Methodist and Childrens Memorial Hospitals.



John R. Schenken, M.D.

His contributions to Pathology were not limited to teaching and research. Early in his career, he demonstrated leadership abilities that were recognized by those around him. He served in an official capacity in many pathology and related organizations. These responsibilities included the executive committee of the American Society of Clinical Pathologists, the Board of Governors of the College of American Pathologists, the presidency of the American Board of Pathology, the presidency of the American Society of Clinical Pathologists, the presidency of the International Congress of Clinical Pathologists, and the presidency of the American Association of Blood Banks.

He became active in the American Medical Association, and in 1964 was elected a delegate from the Nebraska Medical Association. During his fifteen years in the AMA's House, he was one of the select few who were always greeted with affection, respect, and close attention when they rose to speak. He was one of the few delegates who have been permitted the floor when they retire. His comments to the House that "he had many arguments with many delegates and trustees but never lost a friend" were greeted with a standing ovation.

Received and accepted for publication July 14, 1982.

Doctor Schenken was the recipient of many awards. These included the Gold Medal for his exhibit on tropical diseases at the annual meeting of the American Society of Clinical Pathologists in 1944, the Pathologist of the Year Award from the College of American Pathologists in 1961, and the Distinguished Service Award of the American Society of Clinical Pathologists and the College of American Pathologists in 1967.

He was named an honorary diplomate of the Consejo (the Mexican Board of Pathology) in 1966 in recognition of his assistance to Mexican pathologists in establishing their Board in 1962.

In 1967, Doctor Schenken began an additional career. While in Madrid, Spain, at a meeting of the World Medical Association, he attended an illustrated lecture that included photographs of human dwarfs from paintings in the world-famous Prado Museum. This experience stimulated his interest in looking for other medical entities in works of art. After an extensive review of books on art, and after acquiring the equipment and skills necessary to photograph paintings in art museums, he began a series of field trips which took him to art museums around the world.

He soon expanded his art interests to include religious subjects. These efforts resulted in more than 10,000 photographs of medical and religious subjects which were carefully catalogued and organized into 70 categories for religious art, and 30 categories for medical art. Appropriate protocols were then written for each category. Medical, religious, and civic groups throughout the United States then had the rare privilege of attending lectures given by Doctor Schenken on art subjects related to medicine and religion. He was featured at an AMA delegates prayer breakfast, and one of the opening ceremonies of an ASCP/CAP annual meeting.

Along with his many activities as a teacher, researcher, medical leader, and administrator, Doctor Schenken was also a family man, with medicine as a dominant force in the family. His wife, Lucile, was a nurse whom he met while at the University of Iowa. Two of his sons are pathologists, and a daughter married a urologist.

Fortunate indeed were those who had the opportunity of coming under the influence of this truly great man. The sentiments of these fortunate ones are well-expressed in the wording on a plaque presented to Doctor Schenken by the Board of Trustees of Nebraska Methodist Hospital in 1963. This plaque reads:

“ . . . for his important contributions to medical science, for his integrity, his steadfast adherence to the highest standards of professional conduct, for his understanding heart, his sympathy toward those who are ill or in pain, for his guidance and counsel, generously and freely given as mentor to young men and women of medicine, for his unique ability to unite many persons of opposing viewpoints into a team working together for common good, for his leadership in national and international medical organizations and societies.

“These are but a few of Dr. Schenken’s personal qualities which serve to inspire medical staff members, associates and friends and which have aided in the growth and national reputation enjoyed by Nebraska Methodist Hospital.”

F. C. COLEMAN, M.D.
*Medical Arts Center
Tampa, Florida*