

Ochsner Profiles

Edgar Burns

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Edgar Burns

Introduction

Although the exact sequence in which the founders of the Ochsner Clinic were asked to participate is not known, we do know that after Drs. Caldwell and LeJeune were on board the next surgeon to be approached was eminent urologist Edgar Burns. Dr. Burns came to New Orleans in 1928 as an assistant to Dr. Joseph Hume, one of the strongest professors at Tulane Medical School and a widely respected and pioneer New Orleans urologist. Dr. Burns was to become a national and international leader in urology, win numerous awards, and become one of the most respected physicians of his time.

By the time of the opening of the Ochsner Clinic, each of the founders was allowed to bring in an associate as a staff member, and Burns invited Willoughby E. Kittredge to join him. “I do not know whether the clinic is going to work out,” he told Kittredge. “If it blows up, you and I will go back downtown together.” The new project did not blow up. Dr. Kittredge stayed with the Ochsner Clinic for many years and continued his association with Dr. Burns.

Burns’ hard work and vision helped to make the Ochsner Clinic the institution it has become. He was in charge of the day-by-day direction of the clinic and did his job with authority and superb professionalism.

Life and Medical Career

Edgar Burns was born in Maud, Alabama on August 15, 1895. He graduated from the University of Mississippi and obtained his medical degree from Northwestern University in 1922. The next year he married Helen Hope Whitacre and the young couple had a daughter, Catherine. He trained and taught at the University of Tennessee before coming to New Orleans as an assistant to Dr. Hume. He became part of the faculty at Tulane Medical School in 1930 and, in 1943 was appointed Professor of Clinical Urology. By 1945 Dr. Burns was the Chairman of the Division of Urology at Tulane University, a position he held for 10 years. Despite his 2 years in the army during World War I and his abilities as a surgeon, on his arrival in New Orleans Dr Burns was shy.

He walked with slight stoop, perhaps to disguise how tall he was and he was known as “good old Ed” among the young physicians with whom he gossiped over coffee after hospital rounds. He was about to leave the Hume’s office one day to deliver his first medical paper when Hume had a word of advise: “Stand up straight, Edgar, and speak right out.” (1, p5)

After Hume died, Burns “took the dignified air expected of a practitioner who had attained senior stature. But he never lost his warmth with his patients, who trusted him and kept his waiting room crowded” (1, p5). He became one of America’s most eminent urologists and certainly brought a great deal of prestige to the new Ochsner Clinic as a founding member and the head of the Ochsner Urology Department from 1942 to 1960. To the question, “Do you have any hobbies?,” on an application we discovered, Dr. Burns answered, “Work.” Among his many achievements, Dr. Burns served as President of the American Board of Urology, the Clinical Society of Gastrourinary Surgeons, and the American Urological Society. He won the Ramon Guiteras Award of the American Urological Association in 1964 and the Keyes Gold Medal of the American Association of Gastrourinary Surgeons in 1969. He was a prolific researcher and writer who helped to shape the training of urology specialists in America. His 1960 article, “The Present Day Urologist: His Education and His Obligations,” published in the *Journal of Urology*, named and led to the development of several panels on urology education. After a distinguished career, Dr. Burns died in his sleep on August 27, 1973.

Personal character

Edgar Burns marched to the halls with back straight and head high, an unbending authoritarian figure regarded with some apprehension by employees and younger staff

members... Yet they lined up outside the office door to bring up their working problems. They might not always like his decisions, but here was one power who said yes or no immediately.” (1, p49).

Edgar Burns was well respected in the medical community in New Orleans and well liked by his patients for whom he always showed compassion and caring. Once an internist was upset with a patient who interrupted him constantly. “If you’ll shut your damn mouth, I’ll tell you what to do.” The patient complained to Dr. Burns, who fired the internist on the spot.

Dr. Burns’ daughter Catherine Tremaine gave a personal recollection of her father in an interview conducted by Dr. George Porter for the Ochsner Archives’ oral history project. The following are some excerpts:

“My father was a strict taskmaster, he demanded the best and loved me enormously, but he did not know what to do with a daughter. He had a great deal of compassion for his patients and despite being very strict he was a great tease.”

“His love was medicine and his medical practice. He never took a long vacation, and if he took one he came home early to work... He loved all sports and played golf every Wednesday and Sunday.”

During the same interview, Catherine’s son Atwood Collins III reminisced with a great deal of love about his grandfather:

“Pop took to rounds in the hospital at 5:00 AM, and I remember him being an imposing figure, very direct and professional.”

“He taught me how to play golf, he inculcated in me the love of sports.”

“The parking lot attendant at work always tried to get a free consult, and probably asked him the same question of what to do with his stiff neck. Dr. Burns took his time every time and answered the parking lot attendant’s concerns.”

Mr. Collins recalled a well-known anecdote describing Dr. Burns’ imposing, tall figure that it is included by John Wilds in *Ochsner’s: An Informal History of the South’s Largest Private Medical Center*:

“The elevators at the first clinic building at Prytania and Aline were balky, and often operators had difficulty stopping them at floor level. One morning Sidney Broussard, a porter, noted that a car awaiting passengers on the first floor was two or three inches too high. At the same time he spotted

Edgar Burns entering from the parking lot.
“Here comes Dr. Burns,” Broussard warned the operator.
“You’d better get this elevator even.”
“He can look down like anybody else,” the woman responded.
“He ain’t yet,” said Broussard. (1, p49)

Dr. William Brannan, former head of the Ochsner Urology Department joined the Ochsner Clinic in 1957 and was hired by Dr. Burns. In a conversation with the author (ER), Dr. Brannan recalled that Burns “was strict but not overbearing or obnoxious. He insisted that things be done correctly the first time. He demanded that his students meet their obligations and fulfil the goal of becoming good urologists. He had a mild humor and was pleasant to those he respected. . . . He was well organized and ran a tight ship. He would not accept a second-class service from his people or anyone else. He was a man of great integrity, and well respected throughout the United States.”

In order to devote more time to the Ochsner Clinic and Veterans Administration Urology Services, Dr. Burns hired Dr. Jorgen Schlegal in the 1960s to run the urology residency, which was a 3-year joint program based at Tulane. The third year resident had, up to that point, gone to work at a hospital in Alexandria, Louisiana. But Dr. Schlegal changed that, and made Burns mad. “Dr. Burns was ‘King of the Show’ and everybody knew it,” said Dr. Brannan, “and everybody respected him. People would not argue with him, because if they did, he would be very blunt with them.” The Ochsner Clinic had to make arrangements to start sending the urology resident to the state hospital in Monroe (E.A Conway), although in the end this arrangement worked out well.

The Ochsner Clinic

Dr. Burns’ contributions to the creation and success of the Ochsner Clinic were many. He added prestige to the group and was paramount to the development of urology services at the Ochsner Clinic and in the city of New Orleans. He participated in all the decisions taken by the partners and was very vocal about the day-to-day operations and the future of the Ochsner Clinic and the Ochsner Foundation Hospital. “Dr. Caldwell sometimes clashed with Edgar Burns, who had his own ideas about the way the clinic should be run. They might not speak to each other for a while, but eventually ruffled feelings would be mollified” (1, p48).

Dr. Burns was also instrumental in bringing to the group another founder, Dr. Curtis Tyrone. Burns approached his friend Dr. Tyrone in early 1940 saying, “Al Ochsner and Guy Caldwell have asked me to join in a group. I told them I would consider it, but there is one condition. I won’t come unless you also invite Curtis

Tyrone” (1, p58). The other founders were agreeable to Dr Burns’ request and Dr. Tyrone became the youngest of the five founders of the Ochsner Clinic.

Conclusion

Each of the founders of the Ochsner Clinic made major contributions to the development of the institution we enjoy today. While Dr. Caldwell was busy with planning, Dr. Burns directed day-to-day business in the Clinic. When Dr. Merrill Hines, Medical Director of the Clinic, was in automobile accident, the founders realized that in case of a serious accident there was nobody to replace him. Dr. Burns chaired the committee that groomed Dr. Frank Riddick to become the Clinic’s first Associate Medical Director. Dr. Riddick eventually succeeded Dr. Hines serving as Medical Director of the Ochsner Clinic and, later, as President of the Alton Ochsner Medical Foundation.

Dr. Burns’ major contribution was “work.” He was very focused in the practice of medicine and gave the Ochsner Clinic not only a great deal of his time and compassion for patients, but also prestige in the academic world. He was without any doubt one of the most outstanding urologists of his time. According to his daughter, “he aged reluctantly, he loved medicine, and he couldn’t face retirement.” He died in August 1973, a few months before retirement from the Clinic duties.

Acknowledgement

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Reference

1. Wilds J. Ochsner’s: An Informal History of the South’s Largest Private Medical Center. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985.