

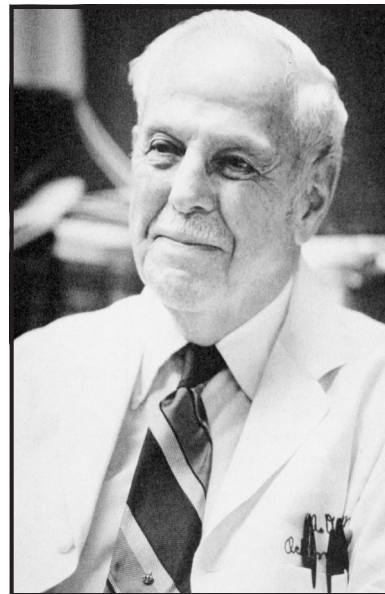
Ochsner Profiles

Alton Ochsner, MD: Physician

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The contributions of Alton Ochsner (1) to the principles and practice of medicine are internationally recognized. His professional legacy has been recorded in numerous manuscripts and books during his long and fruitful medical career, and his personal legacy has been documented in multiple biographies. It is, therefore, both an honor and a daunting task to write on the life and career of Dr. Alton Ochsner for Ochsner Profiles. It is an honor because my name will be associated with others who have written about this renowned figure and a daunting task because I have to reach into Dr. Ochsner's mind and heart through his interviews and through the minds and hearts of those who knew him on a personal level. I hope that my exploration of Alton Ochsner's achievements and personality will lend tribute to one of the greatest figures in medicine.



Alton Ochsner, MD

Life and Medical Career

In 1881, Alton Ochsner's parents, Edward Philip (EP) Ochsner and Clara Leda Shontz, left Bear Valley, Wisconsin, for Kimball, South Dakota, a new community on the railroad line. Kimball was named in honor of Edmund Kimball, father of the railroad surveyor Frank Kimball. From 1881 and for the next 4 decades the Ochsner family would be prominent in the business, political, social, and religious life of Kimball, SD. Benjamin Ochsner, EP's brother, taught the first classes in the school built in 1881, and Benjamin and EP established the first general store in Kimball. EP became the first sheriff of the county, and in the early 1890s the brothers built the two-story Ochsner Mercantile Building on South Main Street.

Edward William Alton Ochsner was born in Kimball on May 4, 1896. Alton developed into a bright, attractive youngster, full of life in a household that gave him a secure, busy existence. Dr. Alton Ochsner noted that the person who most influenced his life was his father. Regarding the difference between his father's and his own life, he said, "His was more of a humdrum thing, the same thing every day; whereas mine is a different challenge every hour." About his mother, Dr. Ochsner noted, "She gave people the benefit of the doubt, and always could find excuses

for others' shortcomings." Alton Ochsner simply said, "I loved my mother" (2).

School lessons were easy for Dr. Ochsner. In the early grades he finished his assignments before anybody else, then he looked around for something to do, often ending in trouble. Alton's mother told the teacher to assign him extra reading, which solved the problem. At 18 years of age, Alton Ochsner matriculated at the University of South Dakota at Vermillion. He then completed a 2-year premedical course and a 2-year medical school program with a grade point average of 3.87 on a scale of 4. When Alton finished at the University of South Dakota on June 3, 1918, he needed to obtain the qualifications necessary to become a practicing physician, specifically a surgeon (2).

At this time Albert John (AJ) Ochsner became his mentor and started him on the path that would lead Alton Ochsner to develop into one of the best-trained surgeons in the United States (3). AJ recommended first that Alton attend and obtain a medical degree from the Washington University School of Medicine at Saint Louis. After obtaining his medical degree in 1920, Alton

Ochsner trained in internal medicine for 1 year at Barnes Hospital and subsequently became AJ's surgical resident in Chicago. Some of Alton's recollections are important notes to the development of his professional life. As an example, though Alton was used to working long hours at the University of South Dakota and very much enjoyed his new life in surgery, he found that it was difficult to keep up with AJ's schedule. His sister, Mary Kaynor, quoted Alton telling the family; "[AJ] is going to kill me before we get through." AJ rode horseback every morning and expected Alton to get up early and accompany him to discuss medicine. "I'll be too tired" Alton said. "You are an Ochsner and you can take it," AJ responded. AJ eventually imparted to Alton the work habits that shaped his future. No one heard the mature Alton Ochsner express any reluctance about working long and hard.

AJ was able to arrange surgical residences for Alton with two of the best medical surgeons in the world: Professor Paul Clairmont in Zurich and Professor Victor Schmieden in Frankfurt. During his 2 years in Europe, Alton Ochsner married Isabel Kathryn Lockwood, who eventually bore him four children: Edward William Alton Ochsner Jr. (Akky), John Lockwood Ochsner, Mims Gage Ochsner and Isabel Ochsner (Sis). All three boys went on to become great surgeons in their own right.

Upon his return from Europe, he practiced surgery in Chicago before leaving to become a member of the faculty at the University of Wisconsin. Alton Ochsner reminisced about Wisconsin, "The experience of Wisconsin was extremely pleasant. It was a new school, and all of the clinical faculty were relatively young and very enthusiastic. I fit in with it very well and had a delightful time" (2). In 1926, just as Alton Ochsner was settling in Wisconsin, the famous Rudolph Matas was readying for retirement from his long-standing position as a Chairman of Surgery at the Tulane University School of Medicine. Tulane's Dean, C.C. Bass, advocated bringing in someone from outside the school to fill the surgery chair and devote all of his time to Tulane. Under the same arrangement, John H. Musser had become Chairman of the Department of Medicine a year earlier. Dr. Musser had hired George Herrmann, who had trained with Alton Ochsner at Barnes, as a member of the faculty of the Department of Medicine. It was George Herrmann who submitted Alton Ochsner's name for the Chairman of Surgery post. In January 1927, at the age of 30, Alton Ochsner received a letter from Dean Bass inviting him to interview for the position of Chairman of the Department of Surgery (2). The position was offered to and accepted by Alton Ochsner, and, in the summer of 1927, he became the new Chairman of Surgery.

It was a controversial appointment. He was only 31 years old and seemed an unlikely candidate to succeed the idolized Rudolph Matas. Although Tulane did not have its own hospital,

Alton Ochsner succeeded in organizing one of the America's premier surgical teaching programs at New Orleans' Charity Hospital, an institution that provided invaluable clinical and research opportunities to Ochsner and his students.

The founding of the Ochsner Clinic along with four other Tulane physicians was one of many of Alton Ochsner's accomplishments and perhaps his greatest legacy (1,2). By opening the Ochsner Clinic on January 2, 1942, Dr. Ochsner and his four partners, Guy Alvin Caldwell, Edgar Burns, Francis E LeJeune and Curtis Tyrone, created a new system for delivering health care in the Gulf South and definitively shook up the medical establishment. But the Clinic would not have been possible if not for the high regard in which the partners (and Dr. Ochsner, in particular) were held in the New Orleans community.

One of Dr. Caldwell's patients was the wife of Rudolf S. Hecht, the chairman of the board of Hibernia National Bank. Dr. Caldwell arranged a meeting between the banker and Alton Ochsner. Dr. Ochsner said, "Here we are at the gateway to Latin America. . .If we could have an institution here such as the one we are talking about, I think we could attract Latins." Mr. Hecht listened and then said, "This is good; this is good for New Orleans, it's good for Louisiana, it's good for the South and good for the United States." "Yes, Mr. Hecht, but we have no equity," said Dr. Ochsner. "Oh, but you have your reputation." Mr. Hecht arranged for the Hibernia bank to lend the partners up to half a million dollars on their signatures alone. Alton Ochsner once said, "If it had not been for Mr. Hecht, this clinic never would have been. He took a chance. He is entirely responsible for the organization" (2).

Alton Ochsner's leadership in the group was never challenged. The hard work at Tulane University was bringing local and national recognition. When it came time to name the new partnership, Alton Ochsner suggested New Orleans Clinic and Southern Clinic. While he was away, the other four partners told him by telegram, "The baby has a name, the Ochsner Clinic." "No matter what we named it, the public was going to refer to it as the Ochsner Clinic," Dr. Caldwell said later. He also added that other clinics in the country were named after their chief surgeons; for example, the Mayo and Lahey clinics. Later, the creation of the Ochsner Medical Foundation allowed the development of academic programs and research that distinguished the Ochsner Institutions from other private practice groups. Today, their vision has been proven right. The Ochsner Clinic Foundation is one of the largest group practices and academic centers in the nation (2).

In his work in the Clinic, Alton Ochsner was always dependable and always on time. He used his political weight when he felt that something was important for the Clinic. On him

were bestowed numerous honors, including the presidencies of many national and international medical societies. He also became a legend in Latin America, attending famous leaders of Central and South America. Thousands of Hispanic patients came to Ochsner for treatment. In 1948, he received New Orleans' highest civic acclaim; he was named Rex, king of Mardi Gras (4).

Alton Ochsner made many contributions to medicine and surgery, but he will always be remembered for exposing the hazards of tobacco and its link to lung cancer. He was the first anti-smoking crusader. In 1939, in a paper published in *Surgery, Gynecology and Obstetrics*, he and Dr. Michael DeBakey reported, "In our opinion the increase in smoking with the universal custom of inhaling is probably a responsible factor, as the inhaled smoke, constantly repeated over a long period of time, undoubtedly is a source of chronic irritation to the bronchial mucosa" (5). His peers criticized him, but his ideas about tobacco prevailed. Four years after Dr. Ochsner's death, Merrell Dow Pharmaceuticals created the Alton Ochsner Award, to be presented annually to individuals and organizations for their efforts to help people stop smoking (2).

In 1967, Alton Ochsner was required to retire from performing surgery because of the clinic's rules regarding age. Merrill Hines, the medical director of the Clinic at the time, had to deliver the reminder that Dr. Ochsner needed to retire in April 1967. Dr. Hines owed his medical career to Dr. Ochsner, and it was a difficult message for him to deliver. Dr. Ochsner's reaction was as expected: "I won't quit." Dr. Hines waited a couple of weeks, and then paid another visit to Dr. Ochsner. "We have this rule that was passed with your approval. If you won't abide by it then there is no alternative but to tear it up and we'll rewrite it." And Dr. Hines ripped the page in two. Ochsner replied: "You get out of here. I'll quit" (2). On April 28 1967, Dr. Ochsner performed his last seven operations; whereupon, doctors and nurses gave him a farewell party with cake and punch. Though he was no longer performing surgical procedures, he continued to see patients until his death following an attempted aortic valve replacement and coronary bypass surgery on September 6, 1981 (2).

A formal farewell called a "Service of Tribute and Thanksgiving for the Life of Alton Ochsner" was said on Saturday, October 3, 1981 on the grounds of the Alton Ochsner Medical Institutions (1). Several hundred persons came to pay their respects. Many people spoke of the various roles that Dr. Ochsner assumed during life. Perhaps the most pointed summary of his life was the message from President and Mrs. Reagan, read to those assembled by Louisiana Governor David C. Treen, which mourned "the death of a man whose daring and indomitable spirit have

brought hope and promise to our generation and generations to come" (2).

All the physicians he mentored throughout the years agreed with President and Mrs. Reagan. His advice to young doctors was, "Don't forget that you're treating people. You are not treating disease, but people." In a 1952 presidential address to the American College of Surgeons, Dr. Ochsner said, "While working for the 'benefit of humanity,' let us not forget that our work is also for the 'benefit of the patients,' the individual men and women who seek us out in their hours of trial and who need compassion and understanding as well as scientific care" (2). I remember that day. I remember thinking that for all his accolades, Alton Ochsner was a doctor in the true sense of the word, first and foremost he wanted to help patients to get well.

Reflections

It would take several pages to appropriately describe Alton Ochsner and to appropriately reflect upon his personality. I will briefly examine some of my most favorite.

Teaching and the Bull Pen

During his tenure at Tulane, Dr. Ochsner created a diagnostic clinic that became known as the bull pen. This method of teaching made a mark on all the medical students at Tulane (2). The procedure was to have a senior medical student examine a patient in 20 to 30 minutes at Charity Hospital. The student then had to present his case in the amphitheatre and defend his diagnosis against Dr. Ochsner's questioning. "Why did you say this? Why? Why?" the professor asked, while 200 students, house staff, and doctors from Charity were watching. He put the student through this 'psychic ordeal,' he said, because "the practice of medicine is stressful." He wanted to teach future doctors to think under stress. He also described diagnosis as largely a matter of common sense.

If you know the fundamentals and if you know what makes an organ work and you know the interplay of various organs, you can figure out the symptoms pretty well. I emphasized that they had to have a reason. Whenever they made a diagnosis, they had to have a reason. I've often said that if your reasoning is correct, if you get the right information and your reasoning is correct, you'll almost invariably come out with the right diagnosis. You may not, but I'd rather have the person reason correctly and come up with the wrong diagnosis-but you usually do not. If a person can think along in a logical sequence, things will pretty well unfold (2).

L. Sidney Charbonnet Jr., who, as an assistant had the job of selecting the patient for the bull pen, explained in an

interview that Dr. Ochsner did not like tricky cases. “Now don’t get something that’s going to be obscure. Get a case that these boys will normally come upon when they go into practice,” Dr. Ochsner would say (2).

One of his innovations at Tulane was to use journals as a learning tool rather than textbooks. He noted, “I felt that learning medicine from a textbook was obsolete. By the time a textbook had been written, it was old, and I felt that the students should get their information from current periodicals” (2). My personal opinion is that these concepts stood the passage of time; they are very important tools for teaching today and demonstrate the quality of Dr. Ochsner’s teaching abilities.

Mentorship

Dr. Ochsner was a source of strength to the physicians and residents who worked with him. During his medical career, Dr. Ochsner served as a mentor for many surgeons: Paul DeCamp, John B. Blalock, Merrill Hines, Ken Mayer, and Michael DeBakey among others. The latter collaborated with Dr. Ochsner on many projects including the treatment of coronary disease, cancer of the lung, and ligation of the vena cava to prevent pulmonary embolism. Drs. DeBakey and Ochsner developed a close relationship. Dr. DeBakey used to serve as a baby-sitter for the four Ochsner children. He later moved to Houston and continued his close ties with Ochsner, subsequently training Dr. Ochsner’s first two sons Alton Ochsner, Jr. and John L. Ochsner. Even after Dr. DeBakey became one of the most important figures in the world of cardiovascular surgery, he still related an incident that occurred when he was a resident that portrays the qualities of Dr. Ochsner’s mentorship and the importance he placed on mentoring and helping younger physicians develop confidence:

A patient with an infected patent ductus arteriosus was being operated on in the Charity Hospital amphitheatre, which was filled with visiting surgeons attending a surgical congress in New Orleans. I was assisting Dr. Ochsner, and during the procedure and following his instructions, I was attempting to dissect and free up the aorta with my index finger on my side of the vessel in coordination with his efforts on his side when I suddenly realized, with a gripping terror, that I had entered the aorta. The infection had made the wall of the vessel very friable. In a whisper that must have expressed my trepidation, I informed Dr. Ochsner of my concern. His equanimity and self-control were reflected in his calm response and his instruction to me to leave my finger there. He then deftly placed occluding sutures around the opening, and, as he tied the last suture, he asked me to remove my finger carefully. I am sure you can understand my sigh of relief in observing that there was no hemorrhage. He had met this challenge so skilfully that no one realized that a near fatal accident had occurred. Moreover, his

understanding of my own dismay at this near fatal accident reflects his benevolence and magnanimous character, for after completion of the operation, he gave reassurances and commented kindly on my assistance. (4)

Dr. DeBakey commented that this incident might have hurt his surgical career by shaking his confidence if Dr. Ochsner had reproached him. Dr. Ochsner’s reaction to this incident was recorded in a later interview: “There wasn’t anything to say. It wasn’t his fault. Oh, I suppose a lot of people would have tried to blame someone else for it. That’s one thing I’ve tried never to do... Now when someone does something that he’s not supposed to do, then I’ll give them hell” (2).

Dr. Ochsner was at his best in the operating room. There were no tantrums, no cursing, no loud talk—and no doubt as to who was in charge. Once in a while, although it happened very seldom, Dr. Ochsner lost his calm during surgery. One of these incidents was with Dr. Patrick Hanley, a chief resident, who recounted the incident in an interview.

I came to the operating room when Dr. Ochsner was attempting to close a vessel in a young patient, and the sutures pulled out because of inflammatory changes in the vessel wall, leading to profuse bleeding. Dr. Ochsner looked up and said, “Pat, I want you to exsanguinate the patient. Place a cannula in the radial artery.” The idea was that the patient would go into temporary shock; the blood pressure would go down and give him the opportunity to sew the vessel without blood flowing over the entire field. I had trouble finding the artery. Dr. Ochsner exploded “. . . Pat, you don’t know where the radial artery is? You’re a senior resident? Hell, I don’t see how the hell you’re a senior resident. . .” He just kept insulting me, talking about my lack of knowledge. . . I never raised my head, never said a word. . . finally, I got this little bit of artery.

As I was holding it up he said, ‘Pat, . . . you know that’s not the radial artery. That thing’s too small. You don’t even know a damned thing about anatomy. . .’ I didn’t pay any attention to him. . . I finally got the little tube in there and the blood started coming out. I exsanguinated the patient. I didn’t take too much, but I removed a couple of units of blood from the child. Then he went on and sewed things up. . . he told me to transfuse the patient with the blood I had removed. . . and everything was fine.

I never said one word. . . I walked out of the room and went to the dressing room. I was taking my operating room clothes off when Dr. Ochsner came in. He came to my aisle and said, ‘Pat, I want to apologize. What I did in the operating room is the most unbecoming thing for a surgeon. I have insulted you. I thank you.’ I said, ‘Don’t thank me, chief. Hell, I knew you were in a big hole and anything I said would have made matters worse.’ (9)

Dr. Hanley became one of Dr. Ochsner’s closest associates in the Clinic and a devoted friend. The incident demonstrates

that even the best have faults. But the very best know how to apologize when they have done something wrong.

No Excuses

When Dr. Ochsner interviewed at Tulane University for the position of Chairman of the Department of Surgery, he was asked to conduct one of Dr. Matas' clinics. He said to Dean Bass, "...if you get me a case of bronchiectasis, I'll hold the clinic." More than 200 people were present at the Charity amphitheatre including Dr. Matas. Dr. Ochsner said how he worked on a method of filling the bronchial tree and told the audience that he would demonstrate the technique. He sent the patient for an x-ray and while waiting he lectured about bronchiectasis. When the film came back, Dr. Ochsner discovered to his amazement that it was blank. The demonstration was a complete failure. He said, "This has never happened before. It is the first time that I have been unsuccessful in filling the bronchial tree. I must admit that I do not know what has happened" (2). He won the job despite this incident during the clinic, because he did not offer any excuses for his failure and frankly expressed his puzzlement. His belief (one of my favorites and which applies to medicine today) that "there may be a reason for a failure but there never is an excuse" served him well. This quotation (I have emphasized it teaching young physicians or medical students) includes very important aspect of great personal character: Honestly express what you don't know without looking for excuses.

Personal Recollections

My dear friend and colleague Dr. Eduardo (Eddy) Randrup trained in Urology at the Ochsner Medical Institutions, and in one of the highlights of his training, had the opportunity to meet Dr. Alton Ochsner. Edy reminisced, "I went to Dr. Ochsner's office and asked his secretary if it was possible to have an appointment with him. His door was open and, as usual, he was available to talk. When I came in he asked me where was I from? I told him Argentina. 'Oh,' he said, 'look at this.' He pointed to a canvas on the wall (the instruments that he had used in his last surgery). 'This instrument was named after Dr. Finochietto,' a famous surgeon from Argentina." They talked for what seemed hours and Edy asked Dr. Ochsner if they could take a picture together. He complied and then Edy left heartened by the warm disposition of Dr. Ochsner and his interest in Edy's future.

My own medical career has been intertwined with the Ochsner Medical Institutions. In April 1981, I came to Ochsner from Argentina to be a research fellow in hypertension under the tutelage of Dr. Edward D. Frohlich and subsequently trained in Internal Medicine and Cardiology. After spending 6 months at Loyola University in Chicago, I joined the cardiology staff. I had

the opportunity to meet a very unassuming Dr. Alton Ochsner briefly in 1981. I was going to the hypertension laboratory carrying a great number of clinic charts in my hands for a project that I was working on. I stopped waiting for the elevator, I turned around and there was Dr. Alton Ochsner. He said, "Good morning" and kindly added, "What are you doing with those charts?" I hesitated then said, "I am doing a research project." When the elevator came, he asked me to go first since I was carrying charts and wished me luck with the project. I was elated, I was very new at the Institution and Dr. Alton Ochsner himself talked kindly to me without knowing who I was. I thought it would be very nice to meet him personally, since he looked very interested in what I was doing even if it was for a few minutes. A few weeks later, Dr. Ochsner died. This biography is my humble tribute to his kindness towards me 20 years ago.

Final Comment

It has been 20 years since Dr. Ochsner passed away, but his legacy persists. The title of this biography reflects that legacy. Of all he accomplished, and despite the fact that he wanted to be remembered as a teacher, I believe he should be remembered as "the physician, the doctor." He practiced and taught the science and the art of medicine as a true Hippocratic disciple. He was optimistic with patients, he had great bedside manner, and he loved to help people. I conclude with a final quote from Alton Ochsner about the love of medicine.

I've known people who loved to operate. That hasn't been my fascination. My love for it is getting people well, and this is a good way to do it. My love is because I am accomplishing something. It is a mean to an end. (2)

Acknowledgement

The author would like to acknowledge the recollections of Dr. John L. Ochsner regarding his father's life and career.

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