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Links to Penn: A Journey Back Through Over Four Decades

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LINKS TO PENN

A JOURNEY BACK THROUGH OVER FOUR DECADES.

Recalling intermittent events in a chain that started almost a half century ago at Penn's School of Veterinary Medicine is a sobering experience. Can one remember with some reliability what actually transpired, or do events take on a color of their own? So, add your own salt because I can't vouch for the accuracy of numbers of classmates and other quantitative elements and, living in Europe, I do not have easy access to such information.

The years 1936-1940 were not the most brilliant ones of the Veterinary School. The physical plant consisted principally of old brick buildings surrounding a patch of ground that probably harbored more parasitic eggs per square inch than of any other turf in the world—the exercise area for dogs treated with an anthelmintic. Starting (if I recall correctly) with a class of 48 students we ended up with a graduating class of 29 which had to survive unbelievable examination questions requiring pure (and useless) rote memory (shades of "On Old Olympian Towering Tops", etc., for the cranial nerves). Joseph McFarland, our pathology professor (emeritus) who lectured also to the medical and dental students, and Roger Amadon (physiology) made up for many defects in the veterinary faculty.

We were graduated into an uncertain world with war on the horizon, so I decided that further study would not be amiss. My classmate Karl Persichetti and I opened an office for mixed practice and clinical laboratory examinations (human and veterinary) on Old York Road. The office was in a row of run-down and abandoned stores, around the corner from the most successful small animal practitioner in Pennsylvania, Alan Bachrach. He rightly did not fear our competition, and kindly helped us with difficult cases, as did Mort Gradess of Jenkintown. Our income barely covered our minimum expenses and there was plenty of time for study. I was able to complete a Master of Public Health (MPH) degree in 1942 at Penn's Graduate School of Medicine, the only veterinarian in a class of nine (eight physicians). I was dealt with on an equal level with the physicians, and covered purely human medical subjects (e.g., pediatrics). My master's thesis was on polyvalent vaccines for children (tetanus, diphtheria and pertussis), and our class received masterly instruction from Joseph Stokes Sr. on the drawn out arsenical-bismuth regimes for syphilis and potassium permanganate infusions for gonorrhea, the classical treatments still in use at that time.

By June 1942 the war was well underway. I applied for an officer's commission and passed my physical examination for an epidemiological unit that was to be mounted at Johns Hopkins University and sent to the Pacific. For some still unexplained reason the army bureaucracy decided not to activate the unit and I was told to await further orders. I protested by letter to Eleanor Roosevelt that I was being unfairly dealt with, and that the country was not taking sufficient advantage of needed talent. I heard again from the army, acknowledging my letter to Mrs. Roosevelt, and stating that if I wanted to I could enlist as a private, but that I would have to await further orders if I wanted to serve as an officer in a veterinary, sanitary or other suitable unit. Persichetti and I sold our practice for less than a song (it wasn't worth more), and we awaited a call-up by the army. In the meantime I took a "temporary" job teaching at a veterinary school (Middlesex, later called Brandeis—closed in 1947), until December 1944.

Not having heard anything from the army by late 1944, and determined to go overseas, I joined the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation (UNRRA). My connections with Penn ended at that point for many years during which I satisfied a long-held desire to use my professional knowledge abroad to help less fortunate countries. I served for two years (1945-1947) as chief veterinary officer in Greece for UNRRA, followed by two years in Poland for the UN Food and Agriculture Organization helping to establish diagnostic and vaccine production laboratories, and to control major diseases many of which I knew only from textbooks (e.g., foot-and-mouth disease, rinderpest, Newcastle disease, douring, glanders). Those were memorable years filled with human and professional interest.

In 1949 I was asked by the World Health Organization (WHO) to join their headquarters staff in Geneva, Switzerland, as their only "veterinary officer" which developed soon thereafter into a "veterinary public health" (VPH) unit. The term "veterinary public health" was new to the ears of health workers and required (along with "zoonoses") many years to put on the map.

WHO provided an unparalleled opportunity to put to work my 1942 MPH degree from Penn (MPH degree awards were eliminated at Penn the following year because of a war-depleted faculty.) Physicians and health workers could accept a veterinarian on the staff occupied with such diseases as rabies and brucellosis, but they were less prepared to acknowledge competency in epidemiol-

ogy, statistics, food hygiene and public health administration dealing with both human and lower animal diseases. It took about ten years to consolidate veterinary activities in human health programs on something of a global scale by bringing together the potentials and resources of health and agricultural ministries in various countries. Three of my closest collaborators in this effort were American veterinarians—the late Ernie Tierkel ('42), Jim Steele and Ben Blood whose names should ring bells in at least some ears (if not, ask Mark Allam or Bob Marshak).

After a decade of such activities at WHO I decided it was time to refresh my professional base in laboratory research by spending a sabbatical year with Hilary Koprowski who had recently taken over as director of the Wistar Institute and was struggling to give it new vitality. His outstanding success in doing this was commemorated last year at the 25th anniversary of his directorship.

It was during three sabbaticals at Wistar ('60, '65 and '70) that I resumed a close association with the Veterinary School as visiting professor of epidemiology and public health. In the '50s and '60s I enlisted for WHO the expertise of Dave Detweiler, Israel Live and Lawson Soulsby from the veterinary faculty as occasional consultants and research collaborators in cardiovascular disease, brucellosis and parasitology, respectively, an association that continued for over two decades. My lectures at the Veterinary School offered the opportunity to spread the gospel of VPH at Penn in a more systematic fashion. The interest and response of the students was gratifying, and some of them have already made their mark. Mark Allam and Bob Marshak were early supporters of this field of academic study and encouraged development of VPH at Penn. A significant and lasting propulsion to the VPH discipline at Penn was given in the '60s by Dan Cohen who worked on rabies for a year with me at Wistar and later joined the veterinary faculty. John S. Reif ably took over at Penn when Dan moved to Israel. VPH work at Penn is now the responsibility of Lawrence T. Glickman.

At WHO I became scientific adviser to the director-general in 1962, and subsequently (1969) director of the Office of Science and Technology (later named Research Promotion and Development), in the director-general's office. Although my scientific horizon and responsibilities widened considerably in these positions, my first love of veterinary medicine was not neglected. VPH activities at WHO were placed in the very capable hands of Mohammed Abdussalam who led the unit for over fifteen years, followed by the present excellent incumbent Zdenek Matyas.

I retired in 1976 from WHO to devote more time to laboratory research and to take on the duties on a part-time basis of secretary general of the Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs. I still serve periodically as scientific consultant to WHO. My laboratory research has continued in influenza at the veterinary school in Munich. I try to keep abreast of developments in rabies by continued periodic visits to Wistar, with accompanying stops at the now almost unrecognizable Veterinary School with its splendid facilities for laboratory and clinical research on the Penn campus and at Bolton Center. Thus the links continue.

Editors note: We asked Dr. Kaplan if he would prepare this article citing some of his recollections about the Veterinary School and bring us up to date about his outstanding and interesting career since graduation.