

Biography of William Chester, MD
One fine physician and one fine gentleman.

Hasanovich

by

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The name William Chester, MD (November 26, 1903 – October 24, 1974) has become increasingly familiar to physicians in recent years as a result of something he did in 1930, to wit, the description of a distinctive xanthomatous condition, known today as Chester-Erdheim disease. The significance of that article, Chester's first, was commented on by the orthopedic pathologist Henry Jaffe, who also studied with Erdheim in chapter titled, "Lipid (cholesterol) granulomatosis" in his text: *Metabolic, degenerative, and inflammatory diseases of the bone and joints*. Philadelphia: Lea & Febiger, 1972: 535-41) thus: "In Chester's cases and in the case seen by the writer, determinations of total lipid in the serum were not carried out. Nevertheless, to keep all such cases distinct from other conditions (such as Schüller-Christian disease and essential familial hypercholesterolemia) in which cholesterol likewise accumulates at various sites, it might not be inappropriate to designate the condition in question here as Erdheim-Chester disease, if one did not wish to avoid the use of still another eponym."

Chester was born in 1903 to Anna ^{✓ orf?} Riskin and Jacob Hasanovich, immigrants from the region of Minsk, the capital of Belorussia, in the late 1800's. As was commonly the practice at the time, Mr. Hasanovich changed his last name upon arrival at Ellis Island at about the age of twenty, to the more "American" sounding "Chester." His future wife immigrated at age 16 a few years after his arrival in the west. They settled in Brooklyn where William was born in 1903. William had a younger sister, Beatrice and a younger

brother, Edward. The children were reared in Jamaica, Long Island where Jacob moved his pharmaceutical practice as William was entering high school. The pharmaceutical practice was a successful one and before the great depression had expanded to into a small chain. Jacob was fond of writing and reading poetry to his children. He encouraged his children in their studies and shared his appreciation of the medical sciences. William became a cardiologist in Mamaroneck, New York. Brother Edward became a respected internist and professor at Case-Western University in Cleveland, Ohio. Sister Beatrice attended Hunter College in New York, became a teacher, and married a cardiologist who practiced in Mt. Vernon, New York.

While attending Jamaica high school, William became a fisherman and a skilled athlete. He enjoyed playing tennis, baseball, handball, running long distance on the cross country team, and in particular, playing lacrosse. He received his Bachelor of Science degree from New York University in 1924 where he continued his athletic avocations. Following graduation he matriculated at New York University College of Medicine, from which he received a medical doctorate in 1927. After graduating medical school he persuaded his brother Edward to hitch-hike with him out west and spend the summer working on a sheep ranch in Wyoming taking care of both people and animals. He was assistant editor of the medical school year book the "Bellevue Violet." A rotating internship was then served by him at the Mt. Sinai Hospital in New York City.

From 1928 to 1930, Chester was an "Emanuel Libman and Herbert L. Cellar" fellow at the Charite' Hospital in Berlin and at the Jubliaunspital in Vienna. In Vienna, Chester worked with Jakob Erdheim (1868-1937) who was renowned for his contributions to the field of endocrine and bone pathology. It was in the environ created

by Erdheim that Chester published the first of his scientific articles (table I). After the persistent pleading of an envious Beatrice to her father, she joined her brother during the portion of William's fellowship that was performed in Vienna. Although Jakob Erdheim was a demanding mentor^{1,2}, William Chester found time to experience the local coffee shops and brew houses with the other young men staying with him at the student housing. The housemother reportedly fed the young men salted herring as a cure for hangovers. One of his fondest memories of his time in Vienna was the opportunity to attend, shortly after his arrival, the retirement dinner of Dr. Karel Frederik Wenckebach (1864-1940). Dr. Wenckebach was a Dutch physician practicing in Vienna and the famed pioneer of cardiology who described the atrioventricular block now known as a Wenckebach (Mobitz I) block. This momentous encounter likely influenced Dr. Chester's subsequent decision to specialize in cardiology.

From 1930 to 1931, Chester was an assistant in Hematology at the Mt. Sinai Hospital in New York City. This was followed by a residency in internal medicine at Montefiore (1931-32) and additional training in pathology (1932-33) at Montefiore Hospital of Chronic Disease. During this time he met his wife, Ann Mitsak "Mitzi", a nurse at Montefiore. She was born on February 4, 1910 in Bridgeport, Connecticut. Similar to Chester's family heritage, Ann Mitsak's parents were immigrants from the Ukraine. At the time of Dr. Chester's introduction to Miss Mitsak she was under the employ of a noted German cardiologist, **Leopold Liquids**, whom Franklin Roosevelt had brought to the U.S. before the war. As a consequence of that association Miss Mitsak and Dr. Chester became acquainted with many physicians and dignitaries who came from South America to seek medical care from Miss Mitsak's employer. One patient was a

relative of Peru's president Fernando Belaunde which ultimately led to the Chesters becoming acquainted with that president and many other Peruvians.

After completing his training, Dr. Chester began a practice of internal medicine in Mamaroneck, NY. In 1941, was certified by the Board in Internal Medicine. In the early days of World War II, the day after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, he volunteered for the Navy, but was disqualified because of problems in visual acuity. He was, however, able to gain entry to the Army Air Corps where he served as an aviation physician and as a cardiologist. His time in military service was spent in Texas and Georgia. Chester advanced to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. He often got airsick during his flight duties as an aviation physician and did not really care for that aspect of the job. He was, however, proud of his military service and later wore his brown leather flight jacket for years during his evening walks down to the Mamaroneck harbor with his overweight cocker spaniel "Sailor." One of his notable colleagues in the military medical service was Dr. Richard Mudd, great grandson of the famous Dr. Samuel Mudd who treated John Wilkes Booth, the American actor and assassin of President Abraham Lincoln. Mrs. Chester was active in the officer's wives club and was bridge partner to the general's wife. After the war Dr. Chester entered the reserves and returned to practice in Mamaroneck, but remained active in aviation medicine as an examiner for the Federal Aviation Administration and as a member of the Aerospace Medicine Association.

At the conclusion of the war Dr. Chester devoted himself the establishment of a practice and to the rearing of his children. His principal place of practice was United Hospital in Port Chester and he established the first critical care unit there. In collaboration with Dr. Herman Tarnower of Scarsdale diet fame he helped co-found the

West Chester Heart Association. Although he ceased publishing, he remained active in teaching and had a fierce devotion to the well-being of his patients. His last publication was co-authored with his brother, Edward, then a resident in internal medicine just before the outbreak of World War II. He went to the Lahey Clinic to learn about electrical cardioversion but never trusted the safety of the machine. He therefore wore rubber gloves and shoes whenever using it. EKG machines were sometimes brought home for Mrs. Chester to repair; she and the children served as normal controls. Dr. Chester made frequent house-calls and also attended to the needs, including psychological, of former service men and women at the Veteran's hospital. One of his pet peeves was when physicians, particularly surgeons, blamed their patients for not getting well. He always felt close to his patients and knew their family stories. His technical expertise, simple and direct therapies, and his warm personal demeanor often led to comparison to the fictional television physician "Marcus Welby." This was a comparison of which he was proud. He was affectionately referred to as "Uncle Willie" by the nursing staff at the critical care unit.

The Chesters settled in an upscale neighborhood of Mamaroneck where they enjoyed the company of many celebrities of the entertainment world. William Chester had a keen sense of humor, often dry, sometimes sarcastic. Some of his favorite comedians were Buddy Hackett, Milton Berle, and Johnny Carson; the latter was a Mamaroneck neighbor during Carson's early career when he hosted the television show "Who do you trust?" Two notable patients and friends from the entertainment industry were Spyros Skouras, then head of 20th Century Fox and Leonard Goldenson, then head of ABC/Paramount at whose homes the Chesters were frequent guests for the previewing

of movies. Chester preferred the viewings at the Skouras residence because of the less formal setting there. Another notable patient was Bernie Castro, owner of Castro Convertibles, a chain of furniture stores that marketed a convertible sofa whose mechanism was invented and patented by Bernie Castro. In those days there were television commercials showing Mr. Castro's little daughter Bernadette putting the convertible sofa through its paces in order to demonstrate the ease of its operation. It was the Castro family that furnished the department of Cardiology at United Hospital where the photograph in figure one was taken in the late 1950's.

Dr. Chester and his wife had one son, Don (b.1946) and one daughter, Debora (b.1949). The family was well-received in Mamaroneck. In this environ the Chester home became house clinic for the neighbors as well as to their pets; the veterinary talent appears to have been a latent consequence of Chester's time on that sheep ranch in Wyoming. There was a family tradition of eating black-eyed peas on New Year's day, a practice the Chesters had picked up while living in the south during the war. Mrs. Chester was more gregarious than her husband and was very active in local civic affairs, becoming for a time, the president of the Mamaroneck Women's Club. Prior to their marriage Mrs. Chester had become acquainted with some physicians from Venezuela and had made a number of visitations there. She had a working knowledge of Spanish and of German and under her influence Chester and his family became avid travelers, their favorite destination being South America, particularly Peru and Venezuela. This was done in part to get her husband out of his office and away from work for a while. On one trip to Caracas, Venezuela the family found themselves in the middle of an uprising. Whether visiting in Peru or in his daily life in the states, Dr. Chester was a consummate

recruiter for talented young people to enter the health professions, such was his dedication to the field and his concern for the patients.

Sports participation and spectatorship remained passions of William Chester's throughout his life. Fishing expeditions to Long Island sound for bass and flounder were frequent. He continued playing tennis and was a baseball buff. One of his favorite stories was that of Yogi Berra, catcher for the New York Yankees taking note of physician and Yankee in-fielder Bobby Brown reading Gray's Anatomy. Berra remarked "Tell me how it comes out." Another favorite sports moment occurred as he was making rounds at the veteran's hospital when he heard a great uproar. Stopping at the patient's television lounge he found that Bobby Brown had hit the game winning homerun against the Brooklyn Dodgers. He was particularly appreciative of major sports events on television such as the World Series of Baseball for the diversion it provided the patients.

Chester's interest in sports and in his children was manifest by his attendance at all of the basketball games of Rye Neck public high school, where his son played the sport and his daughter was a cheerleader. Dr. Chester regularly attended professional sports events, and especially enjoyed the World Series baseball games when the Yankees were in their heyday. In one special moment his compassion for others, his advocacy of civil rights, and his love of sports were crystallized in a single comment. William Chester's niece Susan (brother Edward's daughter) had traveled from Cleveland to New York to take the board examination in Neurology. When she expressed her anxiety over the exam, Dr. Chester helped her put it into perspective remarking "The really important issue of the day is whether **Frank Robinson gets to manage the Indians.**"

Living near Manhattan afforded the opportunity for William Chester to indulge his love of music and of musicals. Some of his favorite shows were "Oklahoma", "Carousel", "Sound of Music", and "Porgy and Bess." He was a self-taught mandolin player and liked to listen to classical music but also liked the music of Perry Como and of the Beatles; the song "Hey Jude" was one of his favorites. He and Mrs. Chester would sometimes visit the Harlem nightclubs. He smoked a pipe with Amphora tobacco imported from Holland and liked to sing while driving his children to school. To Don and Debora's amusement, some oft repeated tunes were "Daisy" and the Army Air Corps Song.

The family legacy is one of fine appreciation for literature. As Jakob Chester wrote and read poetry to his children so William Chester like to read historical non-fiction and like to read short stories and poetry such as the Longfellow's "Song of Hiawatha" to his children. He especially liked Steinbeck's Travels with Charlie. He attended all of the "career days" held at his children's high school and encouraged their academic pursuits. To his son Don's disappointment, skipping school to attend Yankee World Series baseball games was not an option since education was given high priority. One of Debora's fond memories was the obvious pride shown by her father upon her graduation with honors from Connecticut College in New London, Connecticut.

Despite his advocacy for prevention of cardiac disease, William Chester loved food and shopping for it. One favorite restaurant for the family was Menara's Steak House in Greenwich, CT. The family enjoyed special seating privileges there in reward for Dr. Chester's smooth handling on one occasion of an overweight woman's panic attack while she was dining at that restaurant. The Italian "Saw Pit" on Saw Mill Rd. in

Systems in West Palm Beach, Florida. Debora Anne Hoffman nee Chester is a special education teacher in Louisiana. Niece Susan Chester is a retired neurologist residing in Cleveland, Ohio.

Over the course of his career, William Chester held a number of posts that were indicative of his dedication to service, among them, director of medicine and cardiology at United Hospital, Port Chester, NY. Dr. Chester served, too, on the staff of Montefiore Medical Center, was a Consultant in Cardiology at the Veterans Hospital, Bronx, NY, and was Director of Medicine at the Westchester Branch of Saint Vincent's Hospital. He also served as a president of the Westchester Heart Association, was elected a Fellow of the American College of Physicians in 1944 and was a member of the New York Academy of Medicine, the American Heart Association, and the American Medical Association. He was chairman of the utilization committee at Sarah Neuman Nursing center. He was a member of the American Legion Post 90 and of the University Club of Mamaroneck. He maintained residences at 595 The Parkway, Mamaroneck, as well as in Palm Beach, Florida.

Acknowledgements: Don Chester, Debora Chester, Susan Chester, MD, and Ed Clerkin, M.D. kindly provided information about William Chester, MD.

Table I Medical Publications of William Chester, MD

1. Chester W: \square ber Lipogranulomatose. Virchows Arch Pathol Anat 279: 561-602, 1930
 2. Chester W, Kugel: Lipoid granulomatosis (Type, Hand-Schuller-Christian). Arch Path, vol 14, no. 5, pp. 595-612, Nov 1932
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 4. Chester W: The Trachea in non-syphilitic disease of the ascending aorta and the aortic arch. Am J Roent. 28: 796-800, Dec 1932
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 6. Chester W, and Spiegel L: Hereditary Diabetes Insipidus. JAMA 100: 806-809, March 18, 1933
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 10. Chester W, and Chester EM: The vertebral column in acromegaly. Am J Roent. 44: 552-557, Oct 1940
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Legend

Figure 1. William Chester, M.D., at his desk in the late 1950's as Chair, Department of Cardiology, United Hospital, Port Chester, New York.

References:

1. Romm S: Jakob Erdheim. Eminent pathologist of Vienna. *Am J Dermatopathol.* 1987 Oct;9(5):447-50.
2. Rabson SM: Masters of Modern Pathology: Jakob Erdheim. *AMA Archives of Pathology.* Vol. 68, Oct. 1959, pp.357-366