TSP HISTORICAL VIGNETTE

The History of Laboratory Medicine (Clinical Pathology) in the USA

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In a previous Historical Vignette, the origins of surgical pathology in the USA were discussed. In this article, reflections on the origins of clinical pathology, also designated as laboratory medicine, are presented. Dr. Richard Hausner provided useful leads and background information for this article.

The development of clinical laboratory testing as a distinct medical discipline is closely linked to the formation of the American Society of Clinical Pathologists, which has recently been renamed as the American Society for Clinical Pathology, still designated as the ASCP. An excellent article on the history of the ASCP by Dr. Fred H. Rodriguez, Jr and Dr. John R. Ball can be found at an ASCP web site (http://www.ascp.org/MainMenu/AboutASCP/History.aspx).

In the early decades of the twentieth century, clinical pathology was a nascent discipline barely recognized by physicians. Laboratory testing was practiced to a variable extent by internists and other diagnosticians as an adjunct to their patient practices. Certain practitioners believed strongly in the potential for medical laboratory testing to improve clinical diagnosis. These physicians began to come together in various states, particularly in Texas and Colorado. They tried to get recognition within the American Medical Association (AMA), but without much success initially. This situation provided a significant motivation to develop a separate national organization.

Ward Burdick, M.D., who later became the ASCP’s first Secretary-Treasurer, played a major role in a national organizing campaign. This led to a group of physicians coming together as part of the 1922 AMA meeting in St. Louis, Missouri. On May 22, 1922, at the Missouri Baptist Sanitarium, a group of 39 physicians held the first organizational meeting of the entity which came to be the ASCP. Their goal was to “achieve greater scientific proficiency in clinical pathology, and to maintain the status of clinical pathologists on an equal plane with other specialists.” A constitution and bylaws were quickly produced. At the second meeting on May 23, there were over 100 attendees. Soon thereafter, 145 charter members joined the Society.

The minutes of the initial meeting make for interesting reading. Dr. Phillip Hillkowitz was selected as the temporary chairman and Dr. Ward Burdick as the temporary secretary. For example, in his remarks, Dr. Hillkowitz stated that the practice of clinical pathology as a separate branch of medicine was made possible by the advent of the Wassermann reaction as a serological test for syphilis. This is a classical example of how new developments in science drive changes in clinical practice.

Some early important accomplishments of the ASCP were the establishment of the Board of Registry in 1928 and the publication of the first compilation of standardized laboratory techniques in 1931. The
ASCP predated the formation of the College of American Pathologists (CAP) which was established in 1946. A series of articles by Dr. Lloyd R. Wagner, published in the Archives of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine in 1996 and 1997, describe the beginnings of the CAP and the interactions over these years between the ASCP and the CAP.

As a final note, it is interesting to reflect on the evolution of the somewhat confusing term of “clinical pathology”. The term, “clinical pathology,” originally was applied to clinicians who also practiced laboratory medicine. Then, when the term, “clinical pathology” was applied to pathology, the term encompassed the whole of pathology, and not simply one branch. However, clinical pathology is now generally applied more selectively to that branch of pathology associated with the multiple activities of the laboratory other than anatomic pathology. This often confusing use of the term, “clinical pathology” has led to alternative designations, such as laboratory medicine. Nevertheless, the official subspecialties recognized by the American Board of Pathology are Anatomic Pathology and Clinical Pathology. Board certification clearly trumps semantics.

These musings about the definition of clinical pathology bring to mind the insight of William Shakespeare: “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.”