Introducing Historical Perspectives

Most of us have heard the story of the discovery of penicillin: how in 1928 the Scottish bacteriologist Alexander Fleming discovered a set of Petri dishes contaminated by spores of Penicillium mold that had seemingly destroyed the staphylococcal bacteria he was studying. Less remembered is the fact that Fleming gave up on penicillin within a few months, finding it extremely difficult to extract and purify. His 1929 article went largely unnoticed for nearly 10 years until Howard Florey and his wartime research team, seeking effective treatments for battlefield wounds, found it in the library. Florey’s team deserves primary credit for developing penicillin into a practical antibiotic, yet it was the serendipitous nature of Fleming’s earlier discovery that captured the public imagination.¹ What has been forgotten is that the story of penicillin involved a rediscovery—a great insight that was lost and then recovered thanks to a systematic historical literature search.

Historical research today has become marginalized from mainstream medical investigation and practice. Physicians and researchers are so deluged by information from the present that no time remains to consider the past. We live in a forward-thinking world, confident in progress and dismissive of claims that history may actually have something to teach us.

Pediatrics introduces a new quarterly feature, “Historical Perspectives,” to counterbalance these tendencies. This month’s opening article by Brosco et al.,² for example, explores the implications of a little-known chapter in the history of newborn screening (the rise and fall of testing for histidinemia) for expanded newborn screening policy. It illustrates the primary goal of this feature: to provide relatively concise and readable historical articles or essays that illuminate pediatric practice today.

The Pediatric History Center of the American Academy of Pediatrics, located at its headquarters in Elk Grove Village, Illinois (www.aap.org/research/history.htm), has been supporting the same goals through its collections and oral history projects. Physicians and historians have produced a remarkable amount of scholarly work on the history of pediatrics that remains unknown to most practicing pediatricians. This feature aims to bring some of the fruits of this work to a broader audience in a manner that will be engaging and relevant. Who knows? Perhaps one of the current studies you read about in this month’s issue of Pediatrics will become the “Historical Perspectives” column of the future.

REFERENCES

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