

TULSA MEDICINE HISTORY

George Prothro, M.D.

This is an excerpt from an interview with Dr. Prothro by Gerald E. Gustafson, M.D., on January 22, 2003, as part of a project to collect and maintain an archive of the history of medicine in Tulsa.

One of Dr. George Prothro's prized possessions is a brick. The words on the brick symbolize a significant portion of Dr. Prothro's life in medicine and public health.

"On the brick is imprinted, 'Don't Spit on Sidewalk,' he said. This dates back to the beginning of the last century when tuberculosis was the number one or two killer. People had common towels and drinking cups in hotels and railroad cars and even in schools. People spit everywhere. A health officer in Kansas had the bricks made, required spittoons and eliminated common towels and drinking cups. The result of that kind of preventive medicine is that TB is now about 165th on the killer list."

Dr. Prothro grew up in Clovis, New Mexico, where his family moved from Arkansas when he was just a year old. "Grandpa went out there because a real estate promoter sent a train to show people the wonderful farming in New Mexico. He came back raving about the wonderful crops and you didn't have to clear the land. We had to move there. So, he bought a farm and I don't think they ever had a crop after that first year. He stayed on the farm a few years and gave it up."

Dr. Prothro decided to become a physician at an early age. "When I was seven or eight I saw a movie, I don't remember the name of it, but this young doctor saved the life of his mother and that impressed me. I decided I wanted to be a physician and never wavered although there were many times over the coming years in which I wondered how I was going to accomplish it financially and in other ways."

When asked if he remembered the physicians he went to as a child, Dr. Prothro said, "today we like to think that a patient should stay with us and not change doctors. In our small town there were only three or four doctors who were doing family practice. My parents' philosophy was, 'we like all these doctors so we should rotate between them.' We would have one doctor one time and another the next time. My parents thought they were doing the doctors a favor. It's a reminder that patients perceive things differently than their doctors."

Dr. Prothro attended the University of New Mexico after his first two years at Eastern New Mexico. "At that time we didn't have a medical school in New Mexico so I applied to Baylor, Washington University in St. Louis and, because of the cost of tuition, I made application to Meharry, not knowing at that time that it was an all black school. I was also accepted at Oklahoma but I had already enrolled at Washington University."

Dr. Prothro entered medical school in 1942. "It was during the war so the medical school was on the



tri-semester basis—we went year round with basically no holidays.

I was in the reserve when I started. I had enough money to pay for the first year's tuition that, as I recall, was \$750.00 a year.

The V-12 program came along and I am indebted to the Navy for saving my medical school education, otherwise I financially could not have finished. If you continued in medical school and kept your grades up, you were paid at the lowest enlisted rate. After internship the Navy called you to active duty."

Dr. Prothro graduated in 1945, and following a brief internship in Nebraska, he reported to active duty at the San Diego Naval Hospital and then the Seabee base at Port Hueneme, California.

"The Navy then assigned me to the Veterans Hospital in Augusta, Georgia. The veteran's hospitals were in need of physicians following the war. The Navy could declare you any specialist they wanted. They declared me a psychiatrist. So, I spent a year as a psychiatric physician in the hospital. We had about 1500 beds. At first, I was upset about being assigned as a psychiatrist but looking back it was one of the best experiences I ever had."

Dr. Prothro returned to New Mexico in 1948 where he limited his practice to pediatrics. "I had subsequently taken quite a few courses at Denver Children's Hospital and the University of Texas pediatric department.

"I practiced pediatrics for 17 years and loved every minute of it. At that time I was the only pediatrician within about 200 miles and it was just overwhelming. The typical day would start with a few house calls and then hospital rounds and then to the office. In the afternoon more house calls and back to the office and then more house calls in the evening. So, after 17 years

of that I decided to try something else.”

Dr. Prothro’s transition to public health was easy. “I think pediatrics is as close to public health as any specialty because we are concerned with prevention in children. I originally became the public health officer for a New Mexico four county district. After about a year I decided I would like formal public health training. I applied to the University of North Carolina College of Public Health, one of the nations top public health schools.”

After Dr. Prothro returned to New Mexico, the assistant director of the state health department told him that Tulsa was seeking a public health director. “Usually when you are interviewed they show you around the city and the hospitals, etc. I didn’t see any of this. Cecil Jacobs, the resigning department director took me to Spavinaw to give flu shots to Tulsa water crews. That trip sold me on coming here. I was impressed with the scenery, the beauty, and the difference from eastern New Mexico.”



Dr. Prothro in 1968

Dr. Prothro started work as the director of the Tulsa City-County Health Department in 1968. Dr. Homer Ruprecht was on the board and Dr. Terrell Covington was the chairman.

“We always had a good board. At the time there were two requirements that no longer exist. The health

department director must be a public health physician and five of the nine member board must be physicians.”

Dr. Prothro’s first city commission meeting included on the agenda the change from funeral homes operating ambulance services. “Up to that time they had been providing the service primarily as advertising. It was really quite competitive. There was even a story of three funeral home ambulances arriving at an accident and getting into a fight over who was going to get the bodies.”

Dr. Prothro, with the help of others at the state health department created a new ordinance that essentially is the same one in effect today.

One of Dr. Prothro’s first appearances before the County Commission was to encourage the passage of the first air pollution law to eliminate open burning. “At that time people burned their trash in the back yard in open oil drums. There was a lot of opposition to the new law. One man got up and said, ‘we don’t have an air pollution problem in Tulsa and we will never have a problem here and now we got this long haired public health officer from some diploma mill who’s coming in here to force this ordinance on us under the guise of public health.’ At that time, one of our county commissioners was Robert Newhouse who also was a graduate of Washington University. I said, ‘well

Commissioner, I guess we’re in the same boat.”

There have been many changes in the practice of medicine and public health in Dr. Prothro’s career. “For example,” he said, “thirty or forty years ago the biggest program at the health department was the milk program. They had several hundred dairies and several pasteurization plants. By the time I left there was only one half of one person involved in that program. Food protection and the environment were major concerns.”

On the other hand some things have not changed. “After I had been practicing for a month or two in Clovis, one of the other doctors gave me some advice. He said, ‘George, people are bringing their children to you with a cold and you are telling them to give them aspirin and nose drops. They are coming to my office mad as heck because they paid you three dollars and didn’t get a prescription. Always give them a prescription. That’s what they are paying for.’ You know patients still expect to walk out the door with something in their hands and as a result doctors often overmedicate people.”

“The thing I like to emphasize from my public health background is the answer to our health problems is not the ‘therapeutic breakthrough’ announced every day. The ultimate control of our health problems will come through health promotion and preventive programs. In the 20th century we extended life expectancy about 30 years and essentially all of that was due to public health programs such as immunizations and environmental measures. Smallpox, malaria, measles, tetanus, polio, all were controlled through prevention.”

Before ORU closed its medical school, Dr. Prothro was teaching courses in all three medical schools in Tulsa. He also taught public health administration for the University of Oklahoma in Tulsa. “The single thing that was most lacking in my medical school curriculum was not one single lecture on the business aspects of medicine. Now the business aspects of medicine are in the curriculum. When I started practicing, I remember a conversation with my wife. I said that we’re not in this to make money, if we ever reach a point where we are making \$500 a month then that will be sufficient.”

Dr. Prothro still has a copy of the newspaper ad that the county medical society ran in the New Mexico newspaper listing office calls: \$3.00; house calls-\$5.00; house calls in the evening or a night, \$7.50.

Dr. Prothro continues to be very active in TCMS projects. As chairman of the Council on Concerns of Older Tulsans, Dr. Prothro has led efforts to help older and low income people including developing a uniform application for pharmaceutical companies to use for low cost drugs and creating legislation to transfer unused drugs from nursing homes to indigent patients.

Dr. Prothro said his philosophy about the future of medicine could probably be summed up by a Chinese word. “Someone told me that the Chinese word for crisis combines is two words meaning danger and opportunity. There are a lot of risks in the future but there are wonderful opportunities in medicine. For example, the areas of genetic engineering and nuclear medicine present great opportunities but there are dangers too, which we must avoid.”