

Henry Knowles Beecher 1904—1976



HENRY KNOWLES BEECHER, one of the founders of modern anesthesiology and a leading thinker in the field of medical ethics, died July 25, 1976.

Dr. Beecher was born in Wichita, Kansas, on February 4, 1904. He received his early education in Kansas, including A.B. and A.M. degrees from the University of Kansas in 1926 and 1927. His medical career was, however, centered in Boston. In 1932 he received his M.D. degree, *cum laude*, from Harvard Medical School, immediately after which he started a two-year appointment on the surgical service of the Massachusetts General Hospital, the institution with which he was to remain

affiliated for the remainder of his professional career.

Dr. Beecher soon so favorably impressed the faculty and staff at the "M.G.H." that in 1935 he received an appointment for a year as a Mosley Fellow in the Copenhagen laboratory of August Krogh, the famous physiologist. This was followed, shortly after he returned to Boston, by his appointment in 1936 as Anaesthetist in Chief at the Massachusetts General Hospital. The confidence inherent in the appointment of one so young to a position of such importance and potential was certainly more than amply justified again and again over the next 35 years, but it took Harvard only

five years to recognize and again acknowledge the talent they had in their midst: in 1941 Dr. Beecher was appointed Henry Isaiah Dorr Professor of Research in Anaesthesia at Harvard University, the first appointment to the first endowed chair in anaesthesia in the world.

Dr. Beecher's career, like those of so many others, was soon interrupted by World War II. But even while in military service Dr. Beecher's insatiable urge to observe, to record and to improve the care of patients could not be thwarted. His clinical observations on the early management of battle casualties in North Africa and on the beachheads of Italy remain among the best and most scientific contributions to the immediate care of the victims of trauma.

When the war was over and Dr. Beecher returned to Boston he resumed his studies of anaesthesia, but he did so in a way that no-one had attempted before. He engaged in clinical practice. He was proud of his clinical skills. But he transcended the clinical. He did so by applying the standards of the university to the study of anaesthesia. The result was research of the highest quality: original, important, and, of course, valid. His measurements of respiratory acidosis in surgical patients were the first of their type, for example. His investigations of the metabolic responses to anaesthetics under clinical conditions, studies continued for more than a decade, were equally original and significant, as was his quantitation of the risk associated with anaesthesia and surgery. His greatest accomplishment, however, and the one for which he is most often remembered, was his demonstration that subjective responses were susceptible to objective measurement. Pain, mood, thirst, nausea, and a host of other subjective responses, could, Beecher showed, be quantitated. So, too, could the effects of narcotics, hypnotics and other drugs on subjective sensations. These studies introduced methods such as the double-blind technique and the use of placebos, which today are routine parts of clinical studies. In the process the whole field of clinical pharmacology was established and put on a scientifically sound basis.

His intensity of purpose, his imaginative

curiosity, his indefatigable energy, and his orderly intellect soon made Dr. Beecher as well known to physiologists, pharmacologists, and surgeons throughout the world as he was to anaesthesiologists. With this, of course, came the ability to attract, stimulate and educate others to aspire to the same standards of academic excellence. Dr. Beecher was as outstanding a teacher as he was an investigator. The ranks of academic anaesthesiology today contain more than 50 Beecher-trained professors.

Accomplishments such as these would by themselves have assured Dr. Beecher of a position as one of the founding fathers of modern academic anaesthesiology. But he went beyond this. Influenced, no doubt, by his experiences with studies on volunteers and the effects of drugs on their minds, Dr. Beecher became more and more involved in medical ethics. He was, for example, among the first to recognize and to emphasize the ethical requirement that the rights of human subjects be defined and guaranteed during clinical investigations. The standards he advocated remain the standards promulgated by national and international research councils throughout the world. This same concern for the ethical basis of the practice of medicine also led Dr. Beecher, in the early days of organ transplant, to define for the first time medical criteria of death.

In 1969 Beecher stepped down as Director of Anaesthesia at the Massachusetts General Hospital, and a year later he retired as Dorr Professor of Research in Anaesthesia at Harvard. He hardly retired, though. It was at this time that he became most productive in the area of medical ethics. In addition, he completed a book, soon to be published, on the history of medicine at Harvard.

Dr. Beecher was predeceased in 1973 by Margaret, his charming and ever gracious wife of 39 years. He is survived by three children. He is also survived by a host of present and future anaesthesiologists, who are forever in his debt for all he did to establish the art and the science of modern anaesthesiology.

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