At the Heart of Medicine

Essays on the Practice of Surgery and Surgical Education
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Essays on the Practice of Surgery and Surgical Education

By
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Edited and with an Introduction and Epilogue by
Barton F. Haynes, M.D.

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Dedication

To the surgeons of the United States for dedicated patient care, and to Aggie Sabiston, my wife, for dedicated care of our family.
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Barton F. Haynes, M.D.
June 2005
Introduction

This book is a compilation of essays by David C. Sabiston, Jr., one of the great American surgeons of the twentieth century. A protégé of Alfred Blalock at Johns Hopkins Medical School, Sabiston became Chair of Surgery at Duke University School of Medicine in 1964, and for the next thirty years, shaped American Surgery by the force of his intellect, by his teaching, and by his editorships and national leadership. His seminal research accomplishments led in the development of surgical methods to revascularize the heart, and, as well, led to development of radionuclide scanning of the lung for the diagnosis of pulmonary embolus.

He patterned the Duke Department of Surgery training program after Blalock’s program at Johns Hopkins. Early in Sabiston’s career, Blalock sent Sabiston to work with Donald Gregg at the Army Institute of Research in Washington, D.C. to perform basic research on coronary blood flow, an experience that shaped Sabiston’s career. After becoming Chair of Surgery at Duke, Sabiston provided the means for every surgery resident to spend two years in basic research during clinical training. Sabiston’s philosophy was that the best surgeons were curious and competent scientists as well as technically proficient surgeons.

David C. Sabiston, Jr. also influenced a generation of surgeons worldwide by his thirty-five years of editorship of Sabiston’s Textbook of Surgery, numerous other surgical textbooks, and as editor in chief of the Annals of Surgery for over thirty years. His leadership in American Surgery was recognized by his peers with his election as President of the American College of Surgeons.

Although traditional in his views on training surgeons, Sabiston was a visionary who could recognize important future opportunities. He was the only administrative leader at Duke who recognized the
importance of the AIDS epidemic in 1983. When others ignored the epidemic, David Sabiston invested $5 million dollars and, with a gift from the DuPont company, built the Surgical Oncology Research Facility, a 30,000 square foot Biosafety Level-3 laboratory for AIDS research. From the Department of Surgery program in AIDS, led by Dani Bolognesi, Kent Weinhold, and Thomas Matthews, came two AIDS drugs—AZT and the fusion inhibitor, Fuzeon. David Sabiston never wrote about his contributions to AIDS research, so I have told this story in my epilogue.

His interest in his students and residents earned him every teaching award at Duke, and, as well, earned him the National Teacher of the Year Award from Alpha Omega Alpha. More than one former student has told me long after graduating from Duke that “the greatest thrill of my medical school time was being personally taught surgery in the laboratory by Dr. Sabiston.” Thus, the Sabiston work ethic and his professional values will live on in every Sabiston trainee.

One of the most decorated and honored surgeons of our time, Sabiston has received numerous awards and honorary degrees. However, a major lasting legacy is the legion of surgeons trained from 1964–1994, many of whom have gone on to become division chiefs and departmental chairs around the United States.

Finally, David Sabiston established a tradition of excellence at Duke University that permeated every department in the medical center for thirty years, and this tradition continues even after his retirement.

The purpose of this book is to create a volume that presents representative samples of David Sabiston’s major scientific works, and, as well, presents a series of essays on topics that are important to various aspects of surgical medicine. I have edited David Sabiston’s scientific papers by not including the methods sections and many of the scientific graphs and charts. This was done to preserve the content of the classic message of the text, while making the chapter more readable to the non-researcher. I hope these essays remind current and future generations of doctors of the levels of excellence and commitment he expected in good physicians.

The book starts with chapters on his background and early development in Sabiston’s own words, “David Sabiston on David Sabiston.”
Introduction

Next, we hear of his views on the development of surgery at Duke University School of Medicine and how the Hopkins traditions were transplanted to Duke. Seven chapters in the book are Sabiston’s treatises on the history of surgery and reveal that Sabiston was an avid historian.

An additional seven chapters teach us his philosophy for training students and residents in surgical medicine and should be required reading for surgical educators today. One of the most striking lessons in these seven chapters is the clear message of how much time and teaching it takes to make a good surgeon.

Next come reprints of portions of Sabiston’s classic papers on revascularization of the heart and diagnosis of pulmonary embolism, followed by three chapters on Sabiston’s views on important professional issues such as professional liability, animal rights activism, and national health insurance. Finally, the epilogue tells the story of the Surgery Department and early AIDS research at Duke.

Taken together, Sabiston’s essays on surgical practice and life in medicine reflect a long and richly productive body of work that has touched the lives of physicians and patients worldwide for nearly half a century. They are timely and are written in a style that reflects the man himself—insightful, thoughtful, straight-forward, and gracious.

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