

# Humanism in Medicine and in Life: A Profile of John P. McGovern, MD

## DR. JOHN P. MCGOVERN

is one of Houston's twentieth-century medical pioneers. He has dedicated much of his career to the field of allergies and their treatment. In addition to his groundbreaking work in allergies and founding the McGovern Allergy Clinic in 1956, McGovern has held teaching appointments at nearly all of the degree-granting institutions in the Texas Medical Center. He provided an allergy clinic at Texas Children's Hospital for some eighteen years, and also was the principal co-founder of the American Osler Society.

The influence of Sir William Osler's teaching on John McGovern is profound and has been a guiding force in his life from his first day as a student at Duke Medical School. Osler, a renowned physician and medical educator, emphasized humanism in medicine, the notion that "the practice of medicine calls equally for the exercise of the heart and the head." This was a creed that John McGovern embraced as a student and applied in every aspect of his life's work as a physician, scholar, humanitarian, and philanthropist.

John P. "Jack" McGovern was born at Walter Reed Hospital in Washington D.C. on June 2, 1921. His father, Dr. Francis X. McGovern, served on the hospital staff as a surgeon. Francis McGovern had met his wife, Charlotte "Lottie" Brown, while working at Walter Reed. Jack McGovern said that he "just worshipped" his father who had been a standout baseball player during his college days and later became a dedicated surgeon and physician. The McGoverns lived in a D.C. area apartment where young Jack inherited his father's love of sports, especially baseball. Although he played well as a child, he struggled to make the freshman squad in



high school. Because a career in baseball probably was out of the question, he decided to focus on his other love. Jack McGovern was sure that he wanted to become a doctor. "My dad never pushed me into medicine," he said years later. "Nor did my mother. But I had told her several times that I admired the way my dad gave of himself. He believed in service and he really put the patients before anybody, including himself. He was one of the old type doctors."

Following a path to college in 1936, during the Depression, was a challenge. "I had to make a decision on where to go to school because nobody had any money and I didn't want to take any money from the household," McGovern recalled. His friends wanted him to go to Duke University, but Jack McGovern also considered attending Drexel University in

Philadelphia. "I was debating between those two universities because I knew...I was a pretty confident fellow. I figured, no matter what it was, I could make it happen."

McGovern learned that his Aunt Marian had left \$2,000 in her will for his college education. That was a considerable sum in 1936 and enabled McGovern to begin his college education at Duke University.

Highly motivated, McGovern dove into his undergraduate studies in order to qualify quickly for admittance into the medical school. Part of the process for being admitted into the Duke Medical School was to be interviewed by the dean, Dr. Wilburt C. Davison.

Davison was well known in medical education and had studied under Sir William

Osler at Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar. When he entered Davison's office for his interview, the dean's telephone rang. The interview process was extremely important and McGovern, with a weak grade in chemistry, was concerned that it go well. But Davison continued his telephone conversation. "As soon as he put the phone down it rang again and he got on the phone again. I just got as jittery as I could be," McGovern recalled years later. "I looked up on the wall and I saw right to the side—Davison didn't have any diplomas or anything, he just had photographs on his wall." One photo in particular stood out to the young McGovern, a man with dark, piercing eyes and a handlebar mustache. McGovern later said that he could not sit still anymore and rose from his chair to get a closer look at the photo while Davison continued his telephone conversation. Eventually, Davison con-



firmed the identity of the commanding figure on the wall, Sir William Osler. Davison proceeded to tell McGovern about Osler and his own experience studying under him as a Rhodes Scholar. But the time allotted for the interview was quickly running out. Finally McGovern blurted out, "Dean Davison, when are you going to interview me?" He told the dean about his low grade in an organic chemistry class, thinking that perhaps he also had sunk his chance to be admitted to medical school. But Davison had already discussed McGovern's grade with the chemistry professor. The dean informed McGovern that he would be accepted for the next term. "That was the highlight of my life," said McGovern. But Davison had an assignment for McGovern. He said, "I want you to go get a copy of *Aequanimitas*," a collection of essays written by Osler, "and read it." This was McGovern's introduction to William Osler. A few weeks later, he received a formal acceptance to Duke University Medical School in the mail. Along with the letter was a note from the dean, "Jack, I hope . . . you enjoy *Aequanimitas* as much as I did. -W.C. Davison."

McGovern studied at Duke Medical School and graduated in 1945. From there he interned at Yale-New Haven Medical Center. Eventually, he received an appointment to teach at Tulane University in New Orleans. During those years, McGovern did research, taught his assigned classes, and became interested in pediatric allergy. Sometime during the spring of 1956, he gave a presentation at the Triangle Medical conference in Beaumont, Texas. After the evening banquet, McGovern visited with friends who convinced him to explore the possibility of a move to Houston. He located a converted house on Montrose Boulevard, owned by a local allergist's widow. The downstairs had a desk, small examining rooms for patients, and everything McGovern would need to begin a practice. He called his friend, Dr. Grant Taylor, who was head of pediatrics at M. D. Anderson Cancer Center. Taylor told him, "Come on down. Houston is wonderful...it is hot as hell but everything is air-conditioned."

During his visit to Houston, he accepted an appointment at Baylor College of Medicine as Clinical Professor

in the Department of Pediatrics and Adjunct Professor of Allergy in the Department of Microbiology and Immunology. He also made arrangements to rent the space in the office on Montrose, the first step in establishing the McGovern Allergy and Asthma Clinic. McGovern insisted on being non-salaried faculty. "I could do all the teaching I wanted and all the research I wanted, because I liked that. I really did. I loved academia, but I loved my freedom." In this way, McGovern could teach and do research, while not being obligated to serve on faculty committees. With a new clinic to run, he would have little time for committee work too. As he said later, "It worked out just great."

I don't like to be called a philanthropist. I would rather just be known as Jack McGovern or Dr. McGovern, a fellow who did a good job in his research and teaching and patient care.

Shortly after he formally opened his practice, McGovern established the Junior League Allergy Clinic, which operated out of Texas Children's Hospital. For the next eighteen years, McGovern provided the doctors, medical staff, supplies, and serum, to treat children with allergies.

His medical practice began to grow and so did McGovern's academic career. In time he would publish over 252 articles and some twenty-six books, which he wrote or co-authored. He held faculty appointments to more than twenty universities, as well as hospital staff and clinical appointments at fourteen hospitals. Along the way, in 1961, he established the John P. McGovern Foundation. It seemed that McGovern, a child of the Great Depression, had a talent for investing. In time, the McGovern Foundation became one of the major philanthropic foundations in Houston. Over the years, McGovern has supported worthy causes in education, medicine, substance addiction research, public parks, and the Houston Zoo.

One of John McGovern's first stops

on his initial visit to Houston was at the Texas Medical Center Library. "I have always been very interested in libraries, particularly medical libraries," said Dr. McGovern, "and particularly the archival and the rare book sections. My hobby is history and philosophy of medicine and collecting old and rare medical books." McGovern became an honorary curator of the rare books in the library. Eventually, he donated his personal collection of rare medical books and also his collection of writings by Sir William Osler to the library's History of Medicine collection. In time, he also provided financial support for what became the Houston Academy of Medicine-Texas Medical Center Library. In recognition of his support, in 1996 the Library created the John P. McGovern Historical Collections and Research Center, which houses the History of Medicine collection along with photographs, papers, and artifacts detailing the history of the Texas Medical Center and an extensive collection of other historical medical literature.

Reflecting upon his long career in medicine, McGovern once said, "You know, medicine is work, but it is really not if you are in the right place for yourself. I just loved working with patients and I loved teaching. I didn't go into medicine and teaching and research with any idea of being a philanthropist or making a lot of money."

McGovern will be remembered for these reasons and also for his philanthropy. His name is attached to many institutions and programs he has supported in the Texas Medical Center including the McGovern Historical Collections and Research Center, the McGovern Commons, the McGovern Campus (old Nabisco Building) of the Texas Medical Center, the John P. McGovern Museum of Health and Medical Science, the McGovern Professorship at The University of Texas Medical School at Houston, and the McGovern Center for Health, Humanities, and Human Spirit, which opened in September 2004, also at The University of Texas Medical School at Houston. ■

Information for this profile article came from a series of interviews with Dr. John P. McGovern by William H. Kellar during the spring of 2000.