

Take Note

Book Review:

Scientific Publications by Walter Kempner, MD: Volume II. Radical Dietary Treatment of Vascular and Metabolic Disorders. Edited by Barbara Newborg, MD. Gravity Press, Durham, NC, 2004. 557 pages.

For this reviewer, this volume is a trip back to 50 years ago, when Dr. Kempner was the most renowned clinician at Duke University Medical Center. He is best known as the originator of the rice diet, and the first to demonstrate that severe hypertension and glomerulonephritis could be successfully treated by its application and that malignant hypertension, a common, largely fatal diagnosis of that time, could be treated and reversed.

The book is not a biography, nor is it a discussion of his radical dietary therapy. It is a collection of his scientific papers, plus those of other closely associated team members at Duke. It is of special interest to readers of this Journal and North Carolina physicians, because most of the earlier Kempner papers were published in the *North Carolina Medical Journal* in the early 1940's. The volume also includes papers about Kempner by physicians who knew and worked alongside him, such as Morton Bogdonoff, Jay Skyler, and Eugene Stead, all of whom contributed to a symposium in Kempner's honor in the *Archives of Internal Medicine* in 1974 on the occasion of his retirement from the Duke faculty.

These papers are remarkable in many ways and worth reading. They reflect the limited knowledge base of that time relating to hypertension and kidney disease, and they also reflect the meticulous and detailed data collection and recording that are a part of Kempner's legacy. There are extraordinary before and after pictures of ocular fundi showing the resolution of papilledema and chest films showing reversal of cardiomegaly. These are so dramatic that they caused some well-known physicians of the time to doubt their validity. They also demonstrate the effective use of flow sheets in patient care, long before these became popularized as part of the problem-oriented record.

It is regrettable that these papers cannot portray the personality and power of this remarkable man. He began his career as a bench scientist, working in the laboratory of the famous Otto Warburg in Germany, and continued his studies of cellular

physiology in his early years at Duke. He became a clinician again during World War II, when many of the Duke faculty departed to join the Duke hospital unit in England. His early successes with the rice diet were published and noted, but his earliest presentations were not well received. Such success in the treatment of diseases previously considered incurable was too good to be believed! His patients—most of whom came to him after receiving a death sentence from their physicians at home, and most of whom returned home much improved, and even “cured”—were his staunch supporters and returned to his care over and over again, bringing their friends and making him a wealthy man. Many at Duke were jealous of his success, and it is said that the recruitment of Eugene A. Stead, Jr., MD, to Duke in 1946 was favored by those who thought that Stead would force him out. Instead, Stead recognized the importance of his work and adopted his techniques for his own patients, which is documented in Stead's comments in this volume. Stead defended and supported Kempner, and he, in turn, provided Stead, in his earliest years at Duke, with the financial means to develop his department into a world leader.

Kempner's diet was a combination of severe sodium, fat, and protein restriction, which was found to benefit a number of significant morbid conditions: hypertension, kidney disease, vascular disease, diabetes, obesity, etc. The development of diuretics, potent antihypertensive drugs, and cholesterol reducing agents, plus the difficulty of remaining on this difficult and different diet, made the rice diet less important and even outmoded in the opinion of some, but he was never convinced that any of these “advances” were more beneficial to the patient than his diet. Clearly, much of his success reflects the strength of conviction and a personality that helped motivate his patients to remain on the diet. This complex and remarkable man deserves full credit as the first physician to offer a ray of hope to those with several previously irreversible illnesses, to which the papers in this compilation give convincing documentary evidence.

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