

Reflections on the larger world

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HISTORY

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Yes. They'll forget. For such is our fate; there's no help for it. That which to us seems serious, significant, of the utmost importance — the time will come, and it will be forgotten, or will seem of no importance whatsoever. And — this is interesting — we can't at all tell now just what, precisely, will be considered exalted, important, and what will be considered pathetic, ludicrous. For instance, didn't the discoveries of Copernicus or, let's say, of Columbus, seem at first unnecessary, ludicrous, while some empty-headed twaddle, written by some crackpot or other, seemed to be the eternal truth? And it can come to pass that our life today, to which we reconcile ourselves so, will in time seem strange, cumbersome, stupid, far from clean — even sinful, perhaps —

— Chekhov, *The Three Sisters*

Much can be gained from a study of the past, including an appreciation for how quickly “truth” may turn to twaddle. If we reflect on our own lives, we can probably recall once-cherished notions or objects that are utterly unimportant today. Looking at our profession, we can wonder which of its sacrosanct philosophies and practices will still be revered by pharmacists two or three generations hence. And does pharmacy have its counterparts to Copernicus and Columbus, reviled now only to be extolled at a later time?

In the evolution of human endeavors such as the profession of pharmacy, there are important stories to tell. When these stories filter the time-tested from the trivial, they help explain why things are as they are. They tell us what blend of fate and willful deeds of men and women brought us to our current state. In this knowledge, we take comfort, find purpose for ourselves, and are inspired to build on the best of what has gone before.

Amidst the pressures and details of daily existence, we all yearn for those precious moments of reflection on the life's course we follow. When pharmacists search for deeper meanings in their professional lives, the work of the pharmacy historian can be of immense value. As Glenn Sonnedecker has written, "A natural bridge between the humanistic and the technical is formed by the profession's own history, which seems essential to an adequate understanding and philosophy of the pharmacist's role in society."¹

Documenting early events, assessing their importance, and putting the present in perspective with the past — the tasks of the historian — are no less important for pharmacy than for the rest of society. Many issues relevant to contemporary pharmacists cannot be fully understood without historical perspective. Solutions to many of the problems pharmacy faces may remain elusive without knowing the critical events or trends that shaped them.

History shows us how the broad sweep of thinking and developments in the world at large have affected fields like pharmacy. For example, in this issue of the *Journal*, David Cowen presents a superb treatise on how the concept of individual liberty has shaped the character of pharmacy practice in Western civilization.²

More parochial examples of the value of history can be cited. For instance, if we understand the factors that precipitated the large influx of pharmacists into hospital practice over the past 15 years or so, we might be able to project more intelligently what effects current economic and technologic changes in health care may have on where and how pharmacists practice in the future. By understanding the transformation of hospitals from almshouses to health-care centers, we might better appreciate the scope of changes that could be brought about by the current pressures for out-of-hospital treatment. Indeed, might "hospital pharmacist" become a misnomer for our professional descendants who may find themselves applying their best drug-control and clinical skills in a variety of settings only remotely related to hospitals as we know them today?

We are fortunate to have an organization that is devoted to preserving and interpreting the heritage of pharmacy in the United States. Founded in 1941, the American Institute of the History of Pharmacy (AIHP) has an active program of publications (including an excellent quarterly journal), meetings, and other activities designed to stimulate historical work and to preserve the records of American pharmacy. An individual membership organization comprising practicing pharmacists and historians alike, AIHP merits wider support from all segments of the profession, including hospital pharmacy.

AIHP is at a critical stage in its own history. Following its recent large inheritance from the late Robert and Juanita Fischelis,³ the Institute has carefully developed a plan for using the income from this bequest in ways that will enhance and expand historical and humanistic programs in pharmacy throughout the country. Robert Fischelis, a former chief executive officer of APhA, had a special interest in the history of 20th century American pharmacy; the Institute will reflect this interest in many of its new initiatives.