

The Black American in Medicine

by

W. MONTAGUE COBB, MD, PHD

Chapter One FRAME OF REFERENCE

GENESIS OF THIS NUMBER

The immediate inspiration for this number of the *Journal of the National Medical Association* was the cover of the March 1980 issue of the *Smithsonian*, captioned "Tenth Anniversary—120 Covers." Through the fold-over front and back covers, the monthly magazine of the Smithsonian Institution told the story of its first decade through reduced-size pictures of its 120 issues to its million readers.

Since the basic purpose of the Journal is the same as that of the Smithsonian Institution—"the increase and diffusion of knowledge"—it seemed appropriate for the official organ of the National Medical Association to bring before its 28,000 readers, through 158 covers that span the years 1950 through 1981, insights into the contributions of the NMA during the 86 years of its existence. It seemed equally fitting to inscribe this special number as "The Black American in Medicine," especially as the subjects memorialized through the covers embrace the much wider spectrum of

the health of all peoples and particularly those of Africa. Today none need ask "for whom the bell tolls." All know, "it tolls for thee."

JNMA: THE OLDEST NEGRO PERIODICAL

The *Journal of the National Medical Association*, founded in 1909 and now in its 73rd volume, is the oldest magazine type periodical of any kind published under Negro auspices.* It contains within its pages approximately half of what has come from Negro medical writers. In the beginning this was about the only medium open to them,

**The Crisis*, official organ of the NAACP, was initiated in 1910. *The Philadelphia Tribune*, a newspaper, has been in continuous publication since 1874.

although the Journal's pages have never been closed to anyone.

In the early days, "Original Communications" were naturally few in number, but beginning in the 1940s there has been increase in both the number and quality of articles published.

RECOGNITION OF THE IMPORTANCE OF HISTORY

There have always been some NMA members like the late Dr. Miles Vandahurst Lynk of Memphis, founder in 1892 of the first Negro medical journal, "The Medical and Surgical Observer," who sensed the importance of recording our medical history. In 1912, Dr. John A. Kenney, Sr, published a 60-page paperback, *The Negro in Medicine*, essentially a compilation of noteworthy physicians across the nation, with many rare and valuable photographs. Dr. Kenney was editor of the Journal from 1916 to 1948 and President of the NMA in 1913. But even after the present writer, as editor of the Journal, instituted in 1950 a section on Medical History in each issue, he was for a long time a "voice crying in the wilderness."

THE FIRST NEGRO MEDICAL SOCIETY

In 1939 when this writer published a small hardcover volume of 169 pages, *The First Negro Medical Society—A History of the Medico-Chirurgical Society of the District of Columbia, 1884 to 1939*,¹ historical interest was but lightly stimulated.

The manuscript was first offered to the Society, but its Board felt that all that was necessary was a mimeograph for the members. Dr. Carter G.

Woodson, founder of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (1915) and head of the Associated Publishers, advised that the work should be published in book form as it would be more appreciated outside of the membership than within it.

He was quite correct. Somehow the impecunious author scraped together the half-payment necessary to get the book in press and after the galleys came out he secured the balance by showing the galleys to each member he could buttonhole and getting an advance at \$2.00 a copy. The book was well received. In 1972 when the writer was visiting professor of anatomy at Stanford, a colleague in the department there told him one day that a book dealer in San Francisco had just sold a book he wrote in 1939 for \$75.00. Hence, if you have a copy, know that it is a collector's item now.

HISTORICAL CONTENTS OF THE JNMA

In the Foreword to *The First Negro Medical Society*, the writer stated that

if a competent scholar were to attempt the preparation of a representative history of the American Negro in medicine from the scattered sources now available, he would have to postpone his general account until numerous studies of particular phases had been completed.

In the belief that anyone who can should help in this latter task, there is presented here an account of the first Negro medical society formed in America and probably in the world. The events associated with the organization of this society, as well as its subsequent development, would seem to have so much bearing on the understanding of organized Negro medical progress and relations elsewhere, that it is thought the following collation will be of some value in filling wide gaps too long left vacant and perhaps in stimulating others who are better qualified to ferret out those facts now lost which will enable us to have for future guidance the complete story of the past.

Pursuing this goal, all items of obvious or po-

tential historic value have regularly been published in the Journal since 1950. Historical source material in the Journal came to comprise 470 titles under the following headings: Biographical, Memorial, and Testimonial (245); Public Health, Medical Education, and Organization (108); On Behalf of Education and Merit Awards (16); Editorials (166); Cobb's Columns (15); President's Columns (6); and General Philosophy (14).

Slowly interest began to accrue, more outside of the medical profession than in it. In 1926 Dr. Carter G. Woodson initiated Negro History Week, which was an instant success. The week has now been lengthened nationally into Black History Month. But the surface has only been scratched.

Writing in *Media on My Mind* in 1979, Jim Brown and Willette Coleman stated that blacks

and all people were being taught by the media that: "Blacks don't exist. Film and television ignored Blacks from the 40's through the early 60's; teased them from the mid 60's through the mid 70's; phased them back out in the present and the future."

It is thus with deep gratification that the Editor Emeritus witnesses the publication of this number of the Journal. It signifies that the National Medical Association, at long last, has clearly perceived the value of history in appraising the past and present and in planning the future. The Journal hopes this issue will prove to be a document of permanent value which will serve to stimulate many to take prideful interest in our medical history and its interrelations. *If we do not tell our own story, no one will.*

Chapter Two

BESTRIDING THE GLOBE

THE AFRICAN HERITAGE

"Root Doctor"—this sign was a familiar during the writer's boyhood in Washington, DC, along 7th Street, NW and other predominantly black neighborhoods. Leaflets left at house doors elaborated the wares of these practitioners, as they were in all our major cities, North as well as South. Nor is the root doctor extinct today.

The perception and use of the medicinal properties of various herbals is prehistoric. This is re-

flected in the beliefs and practices of folk medicine among all peoples of the world. From the beginning, religion and medicine have been closely intertwined. Since the time of earliest Man, there have always been individuals who would assert an understanding of cosmic phenomena and catastrophes and extend this knowledge to explain the mysteries of disease processes, as distinct from obvious trauma due to physical agents. Thus, the priest and medicine man were originally one; the