Presidential perspectives of The American Association for Thoracic Surgery

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The American Association for Thoracic Surgery (AATS) was founded on June 7, 1917, for the purpose of providing a forum for the “free exchange of views and experiences” in thoracic surgery. Dr Nathan W. Green, the inaugural secretary and treasurer and 7th AATS president, noted during the AATS founding luncheon at the Waldorf-Astoria in New York City:

Thoracic Surgery has made rapid advances in America. The interest is intense, and new and important observations are made almost daily. We must have a place to discuss them.

Initial concerns from skeptics about creating the AATS were that “lung abscess, bronchiectasis, empyema, and chest wall tumors comprise a narrow field,” and “in two or three years, everything will be said, and the Society will die for lack of interest.” The AATS continues to thrive today, nearly 100 years after its inception, because of the contributions and dedication of its previous leaders.

The AATS held its first meeting in 1918 at the Congress Hotel in Chicago, concurrent with the American Medical Association’s annual convention and during the height of the United States’ participation in World War I. No meetings occurred in 1942, 1943, or 1945, when many AATS members were engaged in the Second World War. Dr Willy Meyer, 2nd AATS president, was the only person to serve two terms, and Dr Richard H. Sweet, 41st AATS president, died while in office. Thus the 100th anniversary of the Association’s founding will occur in 2017, at which time 97 physicians will have served as the Association’s president.

The past century has seen unprecedented growth in our specialty and the AATS. Membership has increased from 50 in 1917 to 1267 in 2011, and the count of 23 physicians who attended the inaugural luncheon at the Waldorf pales in comparison to the 4807 attendees of the 2010 Annual Meeting in Toronto. Change is inevitable. After all, it would have been very difficult to sustain the Association if the annual dues had remained at the 1917 level of \$3 per year. Dr Henry T. Bahnson, 57th AATS president, elegantly sum-

marized progress in the field of thoracic surgery during his career in a 1999 interview¹:

In the last year I was operating and doing clinical work, every surgical procedure that I performed was a procedure that did not exist when I was a student, and I would be a fool to say anything other than the same thing could happen again. I am not sure what [the future] will be or where we are going, but you can be very sure it is going to be different.

It is impossible to know where the AATS is headed if we do not understand where it has been. The pessimist, with his glass half empty, might quote Santayana, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” However, the optimist, whose glass is half full, uses the past as the guideposts for our future, quoting Winston Churchill, “The farther backward you can look, the farther forward you are likely to see.” In 1996, Dr J. Gordon Scannell, 58th AATS president and an avid historian, initiated a series of biographic sketches of early presidents of the Association in the *Journal of Thoracic and Cardiovascular Surgery*.² Scannell’s initial perspective summarized the career of Dr Samuel J. Meltzer, 1st AATS president; to date, 21 perspectives have been published from among the 97 presidents who will have held the position during the Association’s first century.

In December 2009, the Council of the AATS commissioned the Centennial Committee to develop and complete a series of projects with both immediate and long-term impact that will celebrate and commemorate the 100th anniversary of the AATS. To commemorate previous leaders, one of the goals of this committee is to complete the work that Dr Scannell initiated in 1996. For the next 6 years, culminating with the issue that accompanies the AATS Centennial Celebration in April 2017, Centennial Presidential Perspectives will be published monthly in the *Journal*. The current issue includes the committee’s first perspective on Dr Harold Brunn, 21st AATS president.³ These perspectives are meant to celebrate the lives and accomplishments of former AATS presidents and to document their contributions to our field, with a focus on the pitfalls and pearls they discovered along the way. The goal is for us to acquire some insight into the varying pathways through which these individuals traveled to reach the ultimate leadership position in the Association. Both Dr Lawrence H. Cohn, the *Journal’s* Editor and 79th AATS president, and I hope that you will enjoy following this series as we approach our centennial. Please take

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time to appreciate and reflect on the accomplishments of these previous leaders as we prepare to enter the second century of the Association's existence.

Let us now praise famous men,
Ancients of the College,
For they taught us common sense,
Tried to teach us common sense,
Truth and God's own common sense
Which is more than Knowledge.
— Rudyard Kipling

Respectfully,
Marc R. Moon, MD
Chairman, AATS Centennial Committee

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3. Fann JL. Historical perspectives of the American Association for Thoracic Surgery: Harold Brunn (1874-1951). *J Thorac Cardiovasc Surg*. 2011;141:872-4.