

## THE REST OF YOUR LIFE

# Fascinated by Medicine's Past

One of Dr. Robert E. Greenspan's favorite pastimes as a child was a trip with his parents from his home in Montgomery County, Md., to the National Museum of Health and Medicine in Washington. There, he would gaze at the medical instruments, artifacts, and specimens on display.

"I liked medicine, liked seeing the anatomy and seeing the specimens," recalled Dr. Greenspan, a nephrologist based in Northern Virginia. "I always had an interest and pursued that."

Fascinated by the illustrations and photographs of old medical instruments and descriptions of how they were used, he began to collect medically themed books from second-hand bookstores while he was in medical school at the University of Maryland, Baltimore. In

1974, he acquired a first edition of the 1892 book by Sir William Osler, "The Principles and Practice of Medicine."

Before long, he began to assemble his own collection of books and medical artifacts. In 2006, he self-published a 12-chapter, 596-page book entitled, "Medicine: Perspectives in History and Art" (Alexandria, Va.: Ponte Verde Press, 2006), which contains stories of medical procedures, dentistry, pharmacy, and quackery revealed through paintings, photographs, poetry, anecdotes, and instrumentation ([www.medicalhistoryandart.com](http://www.medicalhistoryandart.com)).

"No one had ever written a medical textbook that was personal," he said. "Most of the books you see are about events and discoveries. The thing that interests me is not really names, dates, and who discovered what. I'm more interested in learning from the past directly through letters, documents, and instruments."

The book's chapter on general surgery contains excerpts from a letter written by Fanny Burney, a patient who underwent a mastectomy in 1811 without anesthesia at the hand of Napoleon's surgeon, Dominique-Jean Larrey. After the surgical knife cut into her breast, "I began a scream that lasted intermittently during the whole time of the incision—and I almost marvel that it rings not in my ears still!" she wrote. "So excruciating was the agony. When the wound was made, and the instrument was withdrawn, the pain seemed diminished, for the air that suddenly rushed into those delicate parts felt like a mass of minute but sharp and forked poniards, that were tearing the edges of the wound."

Another remarkable letter acquired by Dr. Greenspan appears in the book's chapter on trauma. Written by 18-year-old Union soldier Merari Bunajah Stevens to a friend back home, the letter describes the 1864 Battle of Cold Harbor, Va., one of the

Civil War's bloodiest battles. Mr. Stevens' father became a casualty of that conflict.

"Men were struck down as if by a great scythe—like grass in haying time—and it was here that Father was struck," Mr. Stevens wrote. "He was at my side during the charge when I suddenly heard him groan. Just then I looked over and saw Father fall to the ground, his uniform soaked with blood. He was shot but a few feet from me. The bullet went in a little back and a little above the left groin and exited near the right hip. On the battlefield, I took off his belts and clothes and then with my Bowie, took the ball out on the field as it was located near the surface under his cartridge box. I have it now in my pocket."

Two years ago, Dr. Greenspan received an e-mail from Mr. Stevens' great-great-granddaughter. "She had the bullet," Dr. Greenspan said. "It turns out that the soldier had become a physician in the Midwest. She sent me pictures of him when he was a soldier, and his two sons who became surgeons. So I have a picture of him, the bullet, and his family, which all came out of this letter. That is fascinating to me."

Dr. Greenspan finds such letters in books or as stand-alone items on eBay or by browsing the inventory of online booksellers. "I fish around and I find medical history books that no one's ever heard of," he said. "I'll buy it for \$4 or \$5 and I'll scan it and there might be a great story or a great quote or it will lead me into another area."

The book also contains images of artwork depicting the practice of medicine dating back to the age of Hippocrates, as well as photographs of medical instruments in his collection. These images include ceramic leech jars and homeopathic sets from the 1800s, a bottle of prescription whiskey from the early 1900s, and the Abrams "dynamizer" and "reflexophone," a quack machine from the early 1900s purported to help clinicians diagnose diseases ranging from syphilis to cancer.

His books and artifacts are on display at home, where he often hosts interested curators, collectors, writers, and artists. "That's how I learn, and that's one of the reasons for the book: not to put it in a corner and in a locked room, but to share those instruments," he said. "A lot of the instruments in the book no one will ever see unless they see them pictured."

According to his Web site, Dr. Greenspan's "wish list" of items to acquire includes a tobacco enema set, a von Helmholtz ophthalmoscope, and a Kolff rotating drum dialysis machine from around 1943.

Dr. Greenspan considers his avocation more of an obligation than an amusement. "As a collector, putting this book together in a personal way was a challenge," he said. "History is not interest-



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**DR. GREENSPAN**



**A photo of Union soldier Merari Bunajah Stevens is displayed with the bullet that hit his father.**



**Dr. Robert E. Greenspan's collection includes a Dieulafoy's aspirator, manufactured around 1880.**



**This all-metal general operating set, circa 1900, also has found its way into Dr. Greenspan's collection.**

PHOTOS COURTESY DR. ROBERT E. GREENSPAN

ing unless it involves people: why they did things and how they did things. From my standpoint, that has been missing in medical books. If I don't take the time to pursue these antiques and related stories, it won't be done." ■

By Doug Brunk

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