Mark Nickerson and the Department of Pharmacology

By Dr. Ashley Thomson, Professor Emeritus, Medicine Class of 1945

Lyneil Israels and Mark Nickerson first met in 1950 in Salt Lake City, Utah. Both were graduate students at the University of Utah College of Medicine—Israels was with Max Winthrobe in Hematology and Nickerson with Lou Goodman in Pharmacology—and they quickly became friends. After Nickerson added an MD to his PhD, he interned on a service where Israels was the resident. Nickerson subsequently went to Ann Arbor, Michigan, as a Professor in the Department of Pharmacology, and Israels returned to the University of Manitoba.

During the mid 1950s, Israels heard that his old friend was being investigated by the McCarthy Committee on Un-American Activities. Nickerson had been stripped of his research grants and academic appointment, pending the investigation. In addition, he had been contacting the University of British Columbia, but was unable to get an interview. The fear of “leftist academics” had crossed the border into Canada, and Nickerson did not know which way to turn.

Israels recognized the urgency of the situation and saw a golden opportunity for the University of Manitoba. He contacted Joe Doupe, Head of Physiology and Medical Research. Together with Buzz Bell, Dean of Medicine, Doupe persuaded University President Hugh Sanderson to offer Nickerson the chance to come to Winnipeg. As the political situation in Michigan deteriorated, Nickerson, afraid of losing his American passport, left his family in Ann Arbor and took a bus to Winnipeg. With help from Israels’s brother Monte, a lawyer, and from Stanley Knowles, the renowned politician, Nickerson obtained his Canadian Citizenship.

At the time of Nickerson’s arrival in Manitoba, pharmacology was part of Doupe’s department. Mel Ormerod taught the subject and was best known for testing horses for controlled substances at the local racetrack. Ormerod was nearing retirement, and there was no ongoing research or laboratory space. Nickerson was assigned two dingy basement rooms, and his first task was to develop and teach a course in pharmacology for medical students. He was imminently successful. Some of his medical students later became PhD students in the new department and continued with academic careers in medicine and pharmacology.

During this onerous period, Nickerson managed to publish six articles dealing with sympathetic-adrenergic factors in hypertension and shock. As a member of Joe Doupe’s department with clinical responsibilities in these areas, it was only natural that I collaborate with Nickerson in clinical studies of new antihypertensives and the use of alpha adrenergic blocking agents in volume- unresponsive clinical shock. Most of these studies were conducted before the advent of intensive care areas and sophisticated recording equipment.

Nickerson attracted a cadre of skilled and dedicated pharmacologists. Peter Dresel arrived in 1956, George Frank in 1957, and Frank LaBella in 1958, all from the United States. The next four years saw the arrival of Ian Rollo, Ian Innes, Ivan Bihler and Carl Pinsky.

Laboratory space and facilities became a pressing need, and funding was required for the construction of a pharmacology building. Nickerson managed to solicit funds from private sources, while the University also contributed. From the start, Nickerson collaborated on the design and construction of the Chown Building. His wide knowledge and understated critical approach undoubtedly made a lasting impression on architects and engineers responsible for construction and contracting services. No detail escaped his attention, including the counters and drawers in individual laboratories. He was finally given a hard hat!

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In 1965, the Chown Building was completed. It contained the Dean's offices on the first floor, Pharmacology on floors 2, 3, and 4, and the animal house on the 5th floor.

While research was the fuel that drove staff and an increasing corps of graduate students, Nickerson still expected the entire staff to participate in lectures and weekly critiques of ongoing investigative activities. This attention to participation was also extended to medical student activities, such as the preparation and presentation of therapeutic conferences, and to basic pharmacology given in the faculties of Pharmacy and Dentistry. All oral reports for scientific meetings by staff members were rehearsed before the entire department, with the potential for repetition if deemed necessary by Nickerson or other department members.

In the early 1960s, the National Institute of Health (NIH) in the United States gave the Department of Pharmacology a training grant of $80,000 per year for five years. The enormous sum of money allowed the department to pay stipends to Americans who were graduate students. The grant also provided money for travel and for research equipment, a much appreciated donation at a time when Medical Research Council support was sparse and often unpredictable from year to year. This training grant was one of the largest NIH gave at the time.

From small beginnings, Nickerson created one of the pre-eminent Departments of Pharmacology in North America in terms of research accomplishments, medical student instruction, and the training of doctoral and post-doctoral students. He also stimulated members of other departments in the medical complex to participate in allied interests.

Nickerson has certainly left his mark. Graduates now head more than two dozen departments of pharmacology around the world. Numerous others occupy prominent positions in academia and in pharmaceutical research in North America, and the number and quality of graduates continues to increase to this day.

Dr. Mark Nickerson passed away on March 12, 1998, at the age of 81.

(Please see page 18 for a tribute to Dr. Lyonel Israefs)

Alumni News

Bannatyne Homecoming 2003 Brings Medicine Alumni Home

September 18-21 was an exciting weekend for many Faculty of Medicine Alumni.

Reunions were held by the graduating classes of 1953, 1973, 1978, and 1983. The class of 1993 also held a mini reunion that spanned two weekends.

Dean Brian Hennen hosted the Faculty of Medicine breakfast on Saturday, September 20th. One hundred and eighty guests attended, and they were pleased to see some familiar faces, including some of their former professors as well as classmates. Special guests included Dr. Allan Downs, Dr. Arnold Naimark, Dr. Anne Sasyniuk and Dr. Ashley Thomson.

Several guests attended with family members who are also Faculty of Medicine alumni – Dr. William Bowman (Med 49) attended with his daughter Dr. Susan Bowman-Canham (Med 78) and son Dr. Paul Bowman (Med 73). Dr. Enid McRuer (Med 49) attended with her daughter Dr. Karen McRuer-Mason (Med 78), and Dr. Donna Semelka (Med 53) attended with her son Dr. Richard Semelka (Med 83).

Following the breakfast, guests were given tours of the Bannatyne Campus before gathering for scientific sessions.

Reunion classes spent the evening enjoying a formal reunion dinner. The class of 1953 met at the Fairmont Hotel, 1973 met at the Hotel Fort Garry, 1978 was at Green Gates restaurant, and 1983 joined the Homecoming Dinner at the CanadInn Polo Park. The class of 1993 had a party at the home of a classmate, and then had a dinner party the following week at Green Gates.

In total, the Faculty of Medicine hosted five reunion gatherings during Homecoming 2003. A special thanks goes to the following class reunion organizers:

Medicine 1953 – Dr. Tom Goodhand
Medicine 1973 – Drs. Garvin Pierce, Larry Reynolds, Rick Ross
Medicine 1978 – Dr. Blake McClary
Medicine 1983 – Dr. Wayne Manishen
Medicine 1993 – Drs. Lisa Bryski, Rhonda Diamond, Wendy McCurdy

(Please see page 17 for photos from Homecoming 2003)