

Interviews with
MORTON A. MEYER M.D.

POSTWAR TRANSFORMATIONS FROM THE
CLINICAL FACULTY PERSPECTIVE



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INTRODUCTION AND INTERVIEW HISTORY

"...in the 1920s and the thirties, and then you come along to the war, UC was a good medical school, not outstanding... So when I talk about the background of the UC Medical School, there were no Nobel laureates, but were they good doctors? Yes, they were good doctors... There wasn't a lot of basic science being utilized at that time, and the whole stress was inpatient care."

Morton Meyer, M.D.

Dr. Morton Meyer was interviewed in his Berkeley office soon after he retired from nearly six decades of clinical private practice in spring 1995. The pile of charts and paperwork on his desk reflected the vast changes in medical care delivery that have occurred during his long career, a matter which he comments upon freely.

Dr. Meyer was born in Iowa, and earned both his undergraduate and medical degrees from the University of Iowa. A serendipitous opportunity to do an internship at Mt. Zion hospital in San Francisco brought him west, and Dr. Meyer gained further training as intern and resident under three eminent Bay Area clinicians: LeRoy Briggs, Gordon Hine, and Harold Brunn. He recalls the style of medical training during the interwar period when physical diagnosis was the paramount goal; at this time, the sparse number of effective drugs and therapeutic procedures explained the therapeutic nihilism of his mentors. When Pearl Harbor was attacked, Dr. Meyer accepted military duty at Letterman Army Hospital, where he remained until 1944, when he served a year as a military physician in war-torn Europe.

Dr. Meyer's role as an observant member of the clinical faculty at UC in the immediate postwar years brings valuable insight into relations between the medical school and the practicing profession at that time. He recalls the long hours of "rounding" at the General and the VA, which brought very little in the way of pay, but declares that the real payoff was, *"I was getting smart."* He also was well known in the East Bay medical community, and sheds light on the long-term rivalry between Berkeley and San Francisco over the proper site for the School of Medicine.

Dr. Meyer met the newly appointed University President Clark Kerr in 1960, the second year of his administration, when Dr. Kerr needed a good personal physician to help him deal with the stresses of office. Their friendship developed into an extraordinary partnership, which proved important as

conditions on the San Francisco campus deteriorated at the same time as the eruption of the Free Speech Movement on the Berkeley campus. During this time, Dr. Meyer became the eyes and ears of the university president; in his own words, "the scarlet pimpernel" of the administrative controversies in San Francisco. Dr. Meyer gives a spirited account of the intrigues involved, and is a crucial witness to the shift from the old mentoring traditions of the clinicians to the advent of research-based scientific medicine.

As this interview proceeds, it becomes apparent that Dr. Meyer played a nearly invisible yet vital role in maintaining communications between leaders on the San Francisco campus and the besieged university president. Dr. Meyer was perhaps the ideal go-between; modest and unassuming in person, but a respected figure among the clinical faculty, he was able to relate the perspectives of those on either side of the conflict. Through his account, we can pinpoint the shifting tides of controversy on campus and identify the turning point that was reached when clinician Francis Sooy (who would later be chancellor), went over to the reformers' side.

In later years, Dr. Meyer has been the personal physician of many of the individuals involved in these events of the mid-1960s, and his insights have been valuable in informing our view of the various factions in the dispute. In the end, it was Dr. Meyer's conviction that change was indeed necessary that proved crucial to the university president's decision. As a follow-up to this individual interview, Dr. Meyer readily consented to participate in a joint interview with Dr. Clark Kerr, and the reader is urged to look at number 13 in our series, the transcript of a lively session in which the two compare their recollections of this important episode in the history of the University of California.

Nancy Rockafellar, Ph.D., August 1996

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