

Interviews with
F. WILLIAM BLAISDELL M.D.

UCSF SURGERY IN THE POSTWAR YEARS:
TRAUMA SURGERY FOR SAN FRANCISCO



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“And unfortunately the nasty thing about surgeons is, you have to have an ego to survive. ... when I talk to medical students, ... I say, as I introduce them to surgery, ‘You may not like surgeons, as a whole we are not the most likable group of individuals. Now the thing that you may or may not perceive is that the surgeon has an ego. And he has to have that ego to survive.’ Medicine is essentially a diagnostic specialty. The medical guy gets his kicks out of diagnoses. Therapy is: ‘God did it. I am going to help God make you better, if I can.’ All right. But you rarely cure anybody in medicine. In surgery you intervene directly into the patient's disease. You play God. And if you make the right decision and the patient does well you get a high and it's like nothing else. And on the other hand, if things go badly, you have a low. When your things go badly, as they will do, if you are involved in doing surgical procedures, how do you maintain your effectiveness if you think somebody else could have done it better? You are either amoral or conversely you believe in yourself. And you have got to have that belief to survive....And that creates a different type of person psychologically than the internist. The internist is a nice guy. He is often an introvert. The surgeon is the extrovert.”

F. W. Blaisdell, M.D.

William Blaisdell was born in 1927 in Santa Barbara into a family of California physicians and surgeons with strong historical links to Stanford University. His grandfather, F. Ellsworth Blaisdell, Sr., graduated from Cooper Medical College during the gold rush years and became professor of surgery at Stanford. His father also trained at Stanford and, after completing postgraduate training in radiology, he rounded out his career as a radiologist. At the time of this interview, Dr. F. William Blaisdell's maternal grandfather, Ehler Eiskamp, was still living at the age of 102 years old; he had the distinction of being the first surgery resident that Stanford produced. Not surprisingly, such a background has nourished a strong interest in history in Dr. Blaisdell and his educated perspective and gift for storytelling enrich this interview considerably. Here he refers to the twentieth century as “the age of the surgeon,” and the truth of this aphorism is borne out in these pages as he describes his lively career.

F. William Blaisdell entered Stanford as an undergraduate when he was sixteen years old and started medical school two and one half years later, graduating in the first post wartime class with an MD in 1952. While in medical school he recalls that he was “attracted by surgery, but I thought I wanted to do everything. I wanted to be what would be called a ‘family doctor.’” So, against the advice of his surgical mentors at Stanford, he obtained a rotating internship at Philadelphia General Hospital, where he gained much experience with all aspects of patient care within this 3,000-bed institution. The Korean War intervened and Dr. Blaisdell honed his clinical skills further, serving as a destroyer division medical officer in charge of four ships with 1200 sailors.

In 1954, now certain that he wanted to be a surgeon, he was accepted into Stanford's coveted residency program and in 1956 went to Peter Bent Brigham Hospital for extra study, a clear path to becoming chief resident at Stanford. At Boston, he spent time scrubbing on closed cardiac procedures with Dwight Harken and working in vascular surgery with Richard Warren. After his time as chief resident at SFGH and Stanford Hospital, and with the help of his mentors at Stanford and Harvard, he was accepted as a fellow in cardiovascular surgery on Cooley's and DeBakey's renowned service at Baylor in Houston. In his lively account of his fellowship year at Houston he brings the reader into the Baylor operating rooms, when open heart surgery and difficult vascular repairs were being pioneered by DeBakey, Cooley, and Stanley Crawford. Here he provides fascinating details on the problems with early heart lung machines, petulant surgeons, and managing complications in the chaotic atmosphere of innovation at Houston.

In 1960, when a job opportunity at Stanford failed to materialize, Dr. Blaisdell was recruited to be full-time chief of the surgery service at the VA in San Francisco by UC Surgery Chair, Leon Goldman. Here he quickly built teaching programs in vascular and cardiac surgery that were unique in the VA system at that time. He also served on the search committee that brought J. E. Dunphy to UCSF in 1964 and he recalls the committee's uncertain feelings: "we didn't think he'd come."

A tangle of politics at the VA hospital coincided with turmoil within the University of California in the mid-1960s, and in 1966 Dr. Blaisdell moved to SFGH to become chief of the surgical service there. Working with talented colleagues and residents, Dr. Blaisdell next developed the nation's first organized trauma service at San Francisco General. While changing the structure of critical care in the American hospital, he also actively pursued surgical research, studying disseminated vascular coagulation, developing new techniques in vascular surgery, and characterizing respiratory distress syndrome.

Dr. Blaisdell continued his career of determined program-building when, in 1978, he accepted the chairmanship of surgery at UC Davis, then the University of California's newest medical school. These interviews were conducted in Dr. Blaisdell's office on the UC Davis Medical Center campus in Sacramento. In these conversations, he presents an exciting personalized account of surgical developments in the last half of the twentieth century, remaining sensitive to social factors and medical economics. The reader might want to consult his written works on medical history. Dr. Blaisdell, along with Dr. Moses Grossman, has recently published a book-length history of San Francisco General Hospital, and is currently working on a biography of UC's pioneer vascular surgeon Edwin "Jack" Wylie. Dr. Blaisdell's presence as a Stanford-trained surgeon on the University of California faculty significantly broadens the perspective of this interview series.

Nancy Rockefeller, Ph.D.

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