



# James Sydney Stillman



A native of Catsaugua, Pennsylvania, James Sydney Stillman graduated from Amherst College in 1929, where, with his life long interest in literature and writing, he served as Editor of the college newspaper. The experience of living through a near fatal infection from a perforated appendix convinced him to become a physician. He graduated from Harvard Medical School in 1934, and trained in internal medicine and pathology at Boston City Hospital.

During medical school, he did a rotation at the beginning of his fourth year at the old Robert Breck Brigham Hospital (RBBH) and witnessed exemplary patient care under the most primitive of conditions. This was 1933 when the active staff of the hospital consisted of three physicians

and three orthopedic surgeons. One house officer and a medical student worked up all the admission histories, physical examinations, and initial laboratory work. They made evening ward rounds, assisted in operations, and even had routine duties in the laboratory and were available for emergencies. There were no housestaff physicians. One laboratory technician ran a one room laboratory. The average length of stay, not counting the patients believed to be “incurable,” was three months and 8 days.

In 1940, Syd became its chief. At the time, the Robert Breck Brigham had been operating for 26 years and was the first teaching hospital for arthritis and musculoskeletal diseases in the US. The hospital was poised between the 19th century hospital world and those which were emerging in the 20th. While not expressly designed as a “scientific hospital” in Boston, as was the Peter Bent Brigham hospital down the hill, it was nevertheless staffed by physicians that were part of the medical elite of the day. Henry Bigelow of Massachusetts General Hospital had stated in 1871 that the medical profession was itself increasingly divided into two classes, “those who practice medicine, and those who contributed to its development.” The “Robert” would be staffed by the physicians trained by a more scientific manner than had been the

physicians of the past. They would espouse a specialized mode of care delivery at the Robert Brigham, which became a model for the comprehensive care of the many chronic arthritis and rheumatic conditions. Dr. Stillman's appointment at the time coincided with an expansion of the medical service "so that it could take over the admission and fundamental care of all patients." The orthopedists served as consultants and worked closely with the rheumatologists. Patients were transferred to the orthopedic service for surgery and the rheumatologists acted as consultants.

The leaders in rheumatology in Boston at the time were Walter Bauer, Charles Short and Marian Ropes at the Massachusetts General Hospital, and Theodore Bayles and Frances Hall at the Robert Breck Brigham. Dr. Stillman learned from these individuals but essentially was self-educated in this field. His strong background in internal medicine and scholarly approach to his patients' problems soon made him a leader in the field.

In 1959, invited by Dr. George T. Berry, he and leaders from five other Harvard teaching hospitals met to examine the possibility of "some kind of combined physical operation and new facilities to be constructed on the site of the present Peter Bent Brigham Hospital." Little did Stillman know that he, like so many others, was embarking on a course that would change not only his life and that of others but the face of medicine in Boston itself.

With the advent of World War II, hiring of new younger staff and the beginnings of a research faculty came to an abrupt end. The younger staff, with Sydney Stillman and Ted Bayles among them, joined the Armed Services and senior physicians, such as Louis Spear and Loring Swaim returned to the hospital until the war ended.

Upon his return to civilian life at the RBBH, Dr. Stillman became interested in the problem of children with arthritis. Although he had no formal training in pediatrics, Dr. Stillman developed into an internationally recognized authority and scholar in the field of juvenile (rheumatoid) arthritis. He established the first comprehensive multi-disciplinary center for the study and treatment of this disease in the US, a model of care which he had observed in England at Taplow. The center incorporated rheumatology, orthopedics, physiatry, ophthalmology, and psychiatry.

Long before it was fashionable to develop databanks in chronic disease, he instituted a system whereby children with various forms of juvenile arthritis were reevaluated systematically every year. This cohort became the longest and best studied group, perhaps in the world.

Over his career he was involved in over 60 publications, predominately in the area of pediatric rheumatology.

In his early fifties, when many individuals are restlessly pursuing other career options, Dr. Stillman became convinced that the ultimate welfare of patients with arthritis and the field of rheumatology in

general would be better served if physicians with skills in basic research could be encouraged to enter into this field. With this goal in mind he actively raised the capital necessary to create a truly academic department at the RBBH, based on fundamental and basic research and encompassing medical education at all levels. He was successful in negotiations with Harvard Medical School in making the Robert Breck Brigham Hospital one of the major teaching hospitals affiliated with Harvard (equivalent to the MGH, PBBH, BI, CHMC). As part of this negotiation he recruited K. Frank Austen to become Chief of Medicine at the RBBH, and subsequently John David and Peter Schur to develop a research and education program in immunology and inflammation of the rheumatic and related diseases.

Over his long and productive career, Syd Stillman was recognized as a leader in the then burgeoning field of rheumatology and served as founder and later President of the American Rheumatism Association from 1971 to 1972.

Eventually freed of his administrative responsibilities, Dr. Stillman received honorary degrees from both Amherst College and Stillman College. At retirement he was Clinical Professor of Medicine at Harvard Medical School.

Syd Stillman was a unique individual who was sensitive to what it meant to be sick or disabled and employed a range of interventions that could be used to improve the life of these individuals. He was a “builder” who nurtured the development of others and took pride in their accomplishments. Syd was a talented, soft spoken gentleman who was devoted to excellence yet never quite took himself seriously and had a droll sense of humor. He was a wise and persuasive teacher of patients, the public, and his colleagues. In his retirement, he pursued his study of the history of Rhode Island with the same passion as he did his study of medicine.

He is survived by his wife Ann and five children.

Respectfully submitted,

Matthew H. Liang, *Chairperson*

Ronald J. Anderson

Peter Schur