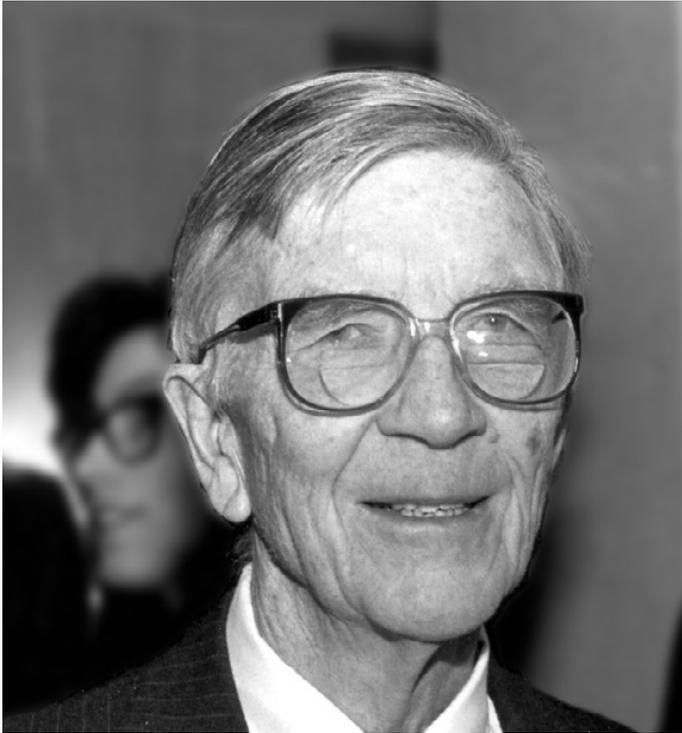




---

# Nathan Bill Talbot



On June 6, 1994, Nathan B. Talbot died at his home in Brookline at the age of 84 with his wife Anne at his side. At the time of his retirement in 1977, he was the Charles Wilder Professor of Pediatrics, Chairman of the Harvard Medical School Department of Pediatrics at the Massachusetts General Hospital, and Chief, Children's Services, Massachusetts General Hospital.

Born November 26, 1909, son of the first physician to hold the positions of HMS Professor and MGH Pediatric Chief, Nate graduated from Harvard College in 1932, and earned his M.D. at Harvard in 1936. He served as an intern, then assistant resident at the Children's Hospital Medical Center in Boston from 1936-1939, and rose from

Research Fellow to Assistant Professor of Pediatrics at Harvard in 1945. In 1950, he became a physician in the Children's Medical Service of the MGH. After serving as Acting Chief of the Children's Service from 1960 to 1962, he was made Professor of Pediatrics and head of the department; then in 1964 he was named the Charles Wilder Professor of Pediatrics. He was a member of the American Society for Clinical Investigation, the Society for Pediatric Research, the American Pediatric Society, The Endocrine Society, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and the American Academy of Pediatrics. He headed the endocrinology unit of the Children's service at the MGH where he pursued special interests in homeostasis and child development. In 1949 he received the E. Meade Johnson Award for Research from the American Academy of Pediatrics for "Endocrinology in Clinical Medicine" and in 1962 he received the AAP Award for his work in nutrition.

After his retirement in 1977, Nate had pursued his other professions, especially his painting. Dr. Daniel Shannon who possibly knew Nate professionally and personally better than any other pediatrician,

described Nate as “captain, conductor, mentor, scientist, artist, and visionary.” Dan wrote that “anticipation of new challenges was Nate’s reason for rising each morning as he pursued all of his scientific, medical, artistic and personal endeavors with the passion of a lover and the dedication of a friar. Anything worth doing demanded his passionate attention; anything done wore the stamp of Talbot perfection, a level reached only by the few. He had not a single profession and no hobbies. Scientific research, pediatrics, building a department at the MGH all were approached with the same zeal, each a profession unto itself. Cabinet-making, harpsichord-building, photography, sailing, water colors, at various times became consuming avocations.” Dan further wrote of Nate, “...fundamentally his model of decision-making was captain and crew, not a democracy. He charted a course and we followed unless we preferred to swim upstream or sail into shoal water. Yet, as crew we knew that he supported our development at captains. At his retirement party, we noted the many MGH pediatric trainees who occupied department chairmanships. While chairman, Nate captained several crafts, each requiring a separate cap. Noteworthy was his christening of subspecialty units in cardiology, gastroenterology, hematology/oncology, intensive care, and nephrology. He steered pediatricians to become “sophisticated generalists,” to provide one class of service to all patients regardless of ability to pay, and to recognize “psychosocial malnutrition”; these when most chiefs were fostering specialization solely in biological models of disease. He led his staff to establish the first community-based ambulatory care unit at Charlestown.”

One of Nate’s proudest accomplishments, his editing the book, “Raising Children in Modern America,” declaimed his fundamental conviction that a range of “raw materials,” the stuff of nurturing provided by parents, was that which fostered psychosocial development in children. This, many felt, was analogous to his earlier work which demonstrated that a range of electrolytes and water, the raw materials of fluid balance fostered maintenance and repair permitting physiologic mechanism to achieve behavioral homeostasis.

Another to be profoundly influenced by Nate was John Truman, who came to MGH when Nate was made acting chief of the Children’s Service. Two years later when Nate was officially appointed, Dr. Truman became Dr. Talbot’s first chief resident. He has spoken lovingly of the trusting, supportive, considerate and stimulating nature of Nate’s guidance and support. John was especially touched by another of Nate’s professions: music. They shared a love of Baroque music, which led to a special appreciation by John of Nate’s having constructed two harpsichords, beautiful works of wood craftsmanship which many have admired. When speaking of Nate at the Memorial Service for him, John compared him favorably with some of the Northern European greats of recent times. Most of all he likened Nate to David Hume in his appreciation of the passions, for John said, “...everything undertaken by Nate Talbot was invested in passion, the passion to learn, the passion to do, and the passion to teach.”

Dr. John Robinson, one of our most distinguished leaders of the pediatric generalists' art, worked under Nate in the 1960's. He has reminded us that it was Nate who looked beyond the walls of the MGH and played a leading role in establishing urban community health centers, first at Bunker Hill in Charlestown and later in Chelsea and Revere. And it was Nate who oversaw the creation of the Bridge over Troubled Water, an effort using large, automobile vans to reach out to emancipated minors, runaway youths and high school drop-outs, an enterprise still extremely active and helpful. Jack especially remembers Nate's statement to his secretary, "I've got to take care of my people," and its corollary "If they're happy they'll perform." Jack also was impressed with Nate's capacity to go with his gut feeling when he felt that should prevail over an apparently more rational approach. He remembers Nate sitting in his chair behind his desk, elbows on the armrests, the five fingers of each hand touching tip to tip just in front of and slightly below his chin, his brow furrowed slightly above the bushy blond eyebrows, his eyes focused beyond the far corner of the room which was apparently in range with a couple of rocks on the Maine coast and saying to Jack, "Now, don't you think we ought to..." And, of course, said Jack, "I immediately forgot an idea with which I had entered the room, persuaded instantly by his mien and delivery that mine was shallow and ill considered beside the one I was about to hear expounded." John said he was not alone in his experience; he remembered John Knowles remarking, "If you give Nate a few bricks, he'll get the whole building."

During Dr. Ralph Feigin's senior year of residency at MGH, Dr. Talbot asked him what he planned for his future career. Ralph told him that he was undoubtedly headed for a career in private practice but that he would not make a final decision until he had returned from a two-year assignment in the Army, an obligation he had to fulfill after his residency. Ralph remembers Nate saying that he was a staunch supporter and advocate for training quality physicians for primary care medicine, but he felt from observing Ralph's activities that he might prove to be a successful academician and thus Nate strongly encouraged Ralph to give academic medicine a chance. Furthermore, Nate offered Ralph the opportunity to serve as chief resident on the Children's Service after returning from military service. Therefore, Nate encouraged Ralph to obtain experiences in a variety of subspecialty areas: behavioral, genetics, cardiology, and infectious disease during the remainder of that year of residency prior to his military training. Most of you know Ralph heeded Nate's perceptive advice which was remarkably prescient, he is now the J.S. Abercrombie Professor of Pediatrics, Chair, Department of Pediatrics at Baylor and Physician-in-Chief of the Texas Children's Hospital, and a superbly accomplished academician.

Another of Nate's notable accomplishments was his very strong support of the establishment of the pediatric service at Cambridge Hospital on the occasion of Harvard's departure from Boston City Hospital. The City proposed that the MGH oversee pediatrics and Dr. Philip Porter was chosen to head that effort; he did so with remarkable ability and success. Many know that under Phil and Nate's leadership the Harvard Medical School clerkship in pediatrics at Cambridge Hospital became, for a

significant period, that one most desired by Harvard medical students. The many discussions that Phil and Nate had about the travails of developing pediatrics in such an environment led to a comment by Nate which Phil remembers: “Cambridge was not the only institution with internal conflicting interests.”

Nate will be remembered best as a dedicated humanist physician and decisive leader who steadfastly lived by his principles with the result that pediatrics at the MGH developed and grew very significantly under his tutelage.

Respectfully submitted,

John D. Crawford, M.D.

Jerome Kagan, Ph.D.

Daniel C. Shannon, M.D.

Donald N. Medearis, Jr., M.D.