

Walter Shelley, MD PhD.

Honorary Overseas Member, BAD

Born Feb. 6th 1917 Died Jan. 30th 2009

Another giant in Dermatology has gone. Walter B Shelley ("Shelley") left us no less than 15 books (the last, published when he was 90, being his amazing autobiography - *The Skin around me: Adventures in Dermatology*) and over 600 scientific articles. Born in St. Paul, Minnesota, and adopted at the age of two, Shelley spent the first years of his life in rural Minnesota. His parents put their lifetime savings into his education and he graduated in Medicine at the University of Minnesota in 1943, acquiring a PhD (hyperthermia and the cardiovascular system) on the way. After army service, much of the time spent conducting research on heat stress in soldiers, he took his residency, under Pillsbury, at the University of Pennsylvania and embarked on a long and glittering career in clinical and academic dermatology.

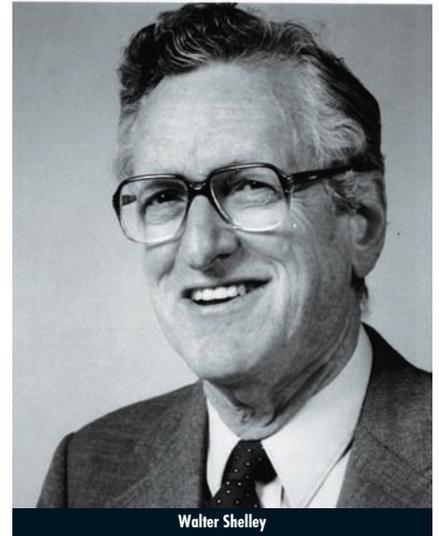
Organized but restless, charming but firm, inquisitive, full of ideas and keen to discover, hating criticism, a lifelong bibliophile and a born writer, Shelley went on to stamp his name in the progress of our specialty. Influenced by Donald Pillsbury (his partner in private practice for 25 years), Clarence Livingood and his co-researchers Harry Hurley and Al Kligman, he became the mentor of numerous American and some British Dermatologists, including Stan Comaish, who spent time working with him in Philadelphia.

I first heard of the name Shelley in 1965 when swotting for the dermatology part of the Edinburgh MRCP exam. *Dermatology*, written by Pillsbury, Shelley and Kligman was an unrivalled teaching text of over 1300 pages. It ignited my interest in the specialty and I often wondered why there were never further editions. Later on I was to learn from Shelley of the shenanigans involved in its 10 year's gestation; once bitten.....!

Classics in Clinical Dermatology began as a Shelley dream in 1946. It became a reality in 1950 when Shelley, now on the

staff at the University of Pennsylvania, met the new resident, John Crissey, who shared his historical bent. The first edition, published in 1953, became a classic in its own right. It must be something of a record that the second, by the same authors, appeared 50 years later! Shelley liked to change his direction of research every five years but he "was in the office every day for 50 years". The breadth of his reports and discoveries is astounding and reflects this. We can thank him for his extensive studies (with Hurley) on hyperhidrosis, and the development of anhydrous aluminium chloride antiperspirants, the surgery of axillary hyperhidrosis and the introduction of botulinum toxin for excessive palmar sweating. With Lennart Juhlin, he developed the basophil degranulation test and, later, reported the ability of Langerhans cells to engulf haptens and antigens. He coined the word keratinocyte, and named many "new" conditions that he saw in the clinic, such as *aquagenic urticaria*, *piezogenic pedal papules*, *pincer nails* and *autoimmune oestrogen dermatitis*. When he left Philadelphia he waved goodbye to laboratory research, but continued to write, now with Dorinda. Case reports continued to pour out ("Case reports are the catalyst for the clinical mind") and *Advanced Dermatologic Therapy* (2 editions) and *Advanced Dermatologic Diagnosis* were large and successful reference books, complemented by frequent appropriate aphorisms (or Shelleyisms) to keep the reader interested ("Therapy sails on the winds of diagnosis", "The placebo effect comes from the physician; not the prescription", "A fully informed patient is a fully frightened patient", "Disease thrives on pessimism", "Patients hear better when you write it down" and "Therapeutic nihilism may be the best way to approach the facts, but not the patient" to mention just a few).

Shelley never really retired and, inevitably, received many honours including an Honorary Doctor of Medicine from the University of



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Uppsala, an honorary BA from the University of Pennsylvania, Master of the American College of Physicians, President of the American Academy of Dermatology, the ADA Gold Medal, an AAD Master of Dermatology, the Society for Investigative Dermatology Stephen Rothman Medal for Dermatological Research, the Gougerot Medal for excellence in medical writing and an Honorary Overseas membership of the BAD.

Outside Dermatology Shelley had a devoted and remarkable family life. He married Marguerite in 1942. Tragedy hit him twice; first when their youngest child, Barbara, died, aged 16 and then when Marguerite died too young. Aged 62, to the surprise but joy of many colleagues, he met Dorinda Loeffel, the only woman dermatologist in the USA at that time to hold a departmental chair. She soon became his adored wife, colleague at work and fellow writer. Twenty nine very happy and fulfilled years were to follow. Shelley leaves Dorinda, Peter (an ophthalmologist) and Anne from his first marriage, Tom, Katherine and Will from his second and hundreds of friends and colleagues around the world who admired this remarkable man and his work.