

History of the Pennsylvania Neurosurgical Society

By Stacy L. Rollins, Jr., MD

Founded in 1884, the Philadelphia Neurological Society was for many years the primary forum for the dissemination of knowledge pertaining to disorders of the nervous system. S. Wier Mitchell was the first president and he remained in this position until 1890. The Society had as members those concerned with both the medical and surgical diseases of the nervous system and included psychiatrists as well. The meetings were well attended and not infrequently patients were presented for discussion. For many years the Society had an annual meeting in conjunction with the Section of Neurology, Neurosurgery and Psychiatry of the Medical Society of the District of Columbia and the site of the meeting was alternated between Philadelphia and Washington. This arrangement developed with the efforts of Walter Freeman who was the Professor of Neurology at George Washington University. He was a native Philadelphian and was the grandson of W.W. Keen, America's first brain surgeon and Professor of Surgery at the Jefferson Medical College. In the 1950's, it became progressively more apparent that the problems of neurological surgery were unique and technical and set apart from other neurological sciences. Social, economic, and political forces began to exert their influence on the practice of medicine, and neurological surgeons needed a distinct organization to deal with all of these factors peculiar to our specialty. This provided the impetus for the establishment of the Philadelphia Neurosurgical Society.

At the annual meeting of the American College of Surgeons in Atlantic City in October 18, 1957, Rudolph Jaeger and Michael Scott met informally to discuss the establishment of a neurosurgical society. They agreed that it was needed and the following day, October 19, 1957, a second meeting was held at Dr. Scott's summer home on Long Beach Island, New Jersey, where tentative plans were made for the organization. A third meeting was held at the Acropolis Restaurant on Locust Street, Philadelphia, and was attended by Drs. Jaeger and Scott as well as Robert Groff and Axel Olsen. The need for the Society and the objectives were established. There was a fourth meeting at the Rittenhouse Restaurant on Walnut Street, March 7, 1958, at which time Francis Grant, Philadelphia's senior neurosurgeon, was asked to be president of the new organization; Frederick Murtagh was asked to be the secretary, a position which he held for many years. It was agreed that no further action would be taken until the officers and Board of the Philadelphia Neurological Society were consulted. They were consulted individually and none registered objection. Therefore, a fifth meeting was held in December 1958 and was attended by Drs. Grant, Jaeger, Scott, Groff, Olsen, Murtagh, and Temple Fay, who accepted the Vice Presidency. A formal organization was established and a constitution and bylaws were put in place. The next meeting convened in March 1959 for the purpose of planning for the inaugural plenary session of the society. It was decided that it would be held at the Jefferson Medical College on May 15, 1959, that Dr. Jaeger would be the moderator and that the thrust of the meeting would be the neurosurgical management of pain problems. Also, it was decided that neurosurgeons from adjacent areas would be invited to attend. These included southern New Jersey, Maryland, Delaware, the District of Columbia, and the cities of Pennsylvania where neurosurgeons practiced.

Accordingly, the inaugural meeting convened on the afternoon of May 15, 1959 at McClellan Hall of the Jefferson Medical College. There were neurosurgeons from

Pittsburgh, Harrisburg, and Sayre as well as metropolitan Philadelphia. Also, from out of state there were neurosurgeons from Delaware, Maryland, Washington, D.C., and southern New Jersey. The entire session was recorded on reel tape by William Whiteley. He subsequently has transposed the proceedings to cassette tapes and I have copies of them that he sent to me. Several patients were presented; members could ask questions and there was an open discussion. The first case was a lady with post-herpetic neuralgia upon whom Dr. Jaeger had performed a per-frontal lobotomy. James Watts discussed the case and felt that the lobotomy received an underlying anxiety state that made her pain acceptable. The next case was a patient with pain from frostbitten hands and the consensus seemed to be that a sympathectomy was an acceptable method of treatment. The third patient was a woman whom I examined who had a painful carpal tunnel syndrome. There were some in the audience that expressed some doubt that such a syndrome really existed. Dr. Whiteley then showed a movie demonstrating his way of doing an anterolateral cordotomy for pain and made a general discussion of this method of treatment. The final presentation was made by Henry K. Shoemaker who described the method used by him and Dr. Jaeger for the selective injection of boiling water intrathecally for the control of pain in certain cases of malignant disease. Dr. Jaeger then adjourned the scientific meeting which was followed by a reception and dinner at the Benjamin Franklin Hotel.

Thereafter, the society met regularly, usually in the spring and fall. Those from outside Philadelphia attended and participated regularly. The thrust of the meetings was always clinically oriented and directed toward improvement of patient care and the introduction of new techniques. For example, one meeting was devoted to intervertebral disc disorders and another at Temple University concentrated on the diagnosis and surgical management of carotid artery disease when it began to be recognized as a cause of stroke. With the broad geographical distribution of the members, it seemed appropriate that the name, the Philadelphia Neurosurgical Society, should be changed. Therefore, at a meeting at the Hershey Hotel around 1961 or 1962, it was voted to change the name to the Mid-Atlantic Neurosurgical Society. Meetings were frequently held in the home territory of the president and included places like Pittsburgh, Harrisburg, Sayre, Atlantic City, Baltimore, Washington, and Annapolis. For the convenience of all concerned, meetings in the last decade or two have been held at one of the hotels at the Philadelphia Airport. Fred Murtagh and Arthur King were in the organization from the outset and both had long tenures as secretary of the Society.

It had become apparent in recent years that the affairs of medical practice are more complex and involve political, social, and economic issues that have to be dealt with at state and local levels. A regional society may provide leadership in a broad sense, but is not in a position to handle effectively the affairs peculiar to the individual states. This is the primary reason that all states have organized their own societies and to participate with other states at a national level in the Council for State Neurosurgical Societies. It would not be possible for the Mid-Atlantic Neurosurgical Society to serve as the vehicle of communication for neurosurgeons of Pennsylvania or of any other state. This resulted in the founding of the Pennsylvania Neurosurgical Society (PNS) in 1959.

While maintaining independence as a separate organization, the Mid-Atlantic Neurosurgical Society served as the scientific arm of the PNS for many years. Bringing history up to the present, the executive councils of both Societies have recognized that it

would be in the best interest of both organizations to unite, while continuing the identity of each. The amalgamation of the Pennsylvania Neurosurgical and the Mid-Atlantic Neurosurgical societies was approved at a joint meeting of the two societies in Philadelphia, April 3, 1992. The Mid-Atlantic will retain its traditional role of serving the scientific needs of the membership. All members of the PNS will automatically be members of the Mid-Atlantic. However, neurosurgeons in the other Mid-Atlantic states will be eligible for membership in the Mid-Atlantic Neurosurgical Society; this rather unique arrangement has its origin in the historical purpose of the Mid-Atlantic Neurosurgical Society.