

BIOGRAPHY

John P. McGovern, MD – Physician, Entrepreneur, Philanthropist

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ABSTRACT

For much of its history, the American Medical Writers Association (AMWA) bestowed 4 awards in honor of 4 of its members: Harold Swanberg, MD, the founder of the Association; Walter Alvarez, MD, in retirement, a nationally syndicated health columnist; Eric Martin, PhD, a pharmacist instrumental in professionalizing regulatory writing; and John P. McGovern, MD, a philanthropist who supported initiatives in biomedical communication. However, the details of the lives of these men are unknown to most AMWA members. Accordingly, this biography describes the life and accomplishments of John P. McGovern, to recognize his achievements and to contribute to the history of the profession and of the Association.

John Phillip McGovern, MD (1921-2007), was a physician, teacher, researcher, humanitarian, businessman, investor, and philanthropist who contributed to the fields of allergy and immunology, widely promoted Sir William Osler’s principles of humanistic medicine, added to the size and scope of Houston’s Texas Medical Center, and enhanced the quality of life in Houston through several major gifts to the city.¹



John P. McGovern, MD.

The McGovern Allergy Clinic was at one time the largest private allergy clinic in the country.¹ Its success and McGovern’s astute investments in stocks and real estate made him enormously wealthy, wealth that he then donated liberally to support dozens of projects that furthered the advancement of medicine and community life. The John P. McGovern Foundation, now headed by his wife, Kathy, continues to support several worthwhile projects.

In the American Medical Writers Association, the John

P. McGovern Award, funded in 1985 by a grant from the McGovern Foundation, “is presented to a member or non-member of AMWA to recognize a preeminent contribution to any of the various modes of medical communication.”² The range of candidates and the nature of the contributions suitable for this award is consistent with John’s own wide range of interests and causes.

(From the author: unless otherwise noted, all information here comes from *John P. McGovern, MD*,¹ a definitive biography written by his friend, Bryant Boutwell, DrPH. This biography is the source of many other accounts of his life.)

GROWING UP IN WASHINGTON, D.C.

John (Jack, to his friends and family) was born in Washington, DC in 1921, the only child of Francis Xavier McGovern, a surgeon in the US Public Health Service, and Lotti Brown McGovern, a most competent housekeeper and gracious hostess. He was also very close with his maternal grandmother, “Granny Brown,” the kind of woman who would (and did) open her kitchen during the Republican Great Depression to feed families in need. In addition, his second cousin, the actress Helen Hayes, seemed to have been both a confidant and an inspiration to him. The close and supportive nature of the McGovern, Brown, and Hayes families provided several role models of nurturing, hard work, enjoyment, and caring for others.

Even in childhood, John was unusually deliberate, careful, perfectionistic, and above all, driven. As a boy, he liked baseball, football, soccer, stamp collecting (he eventually sold his collection to pay for college expenses), fishing, camping (he was a Boy Scout), and playing marbles. Not the informal play that many children enjoy from time to time, but, as he told his biographer, the “real game of marbles—ringer. A 10-foot circle with 13 marbles in a cross at its center. I’m talking lag lines, pitch lines, and knuckling down to knock the most marbles at center from the ring.”

In fact, his approach to marbles is telling. At age 9, John spent long hours shooting marbles until he was very skilled.

He, like most boys, played with marbles made of cheap glass. However, some marbles are made of quartz—the prized agates—and John was set on collecting agates. He hit on a strategy that involved an attractive challenge. He would bet a bottle of glass marbles against 1 or 2 agates. Few boys could resist the possibility of winning so many marbles, even if they were glass. John's strategy worked—within a year, he owned most of the agates in the neighborhood. The story illustrates the traits he would carry into adulthood: competitiveness and confidence, thoughtful and careful planning, hard work and discipline, and collecting and preserving things of value.

MEDICAL TRAINING

After graduating high school in 1939, John matriculated into Duke University in Durham, North Carolina. He began medical school in 1942, after completing 3 years of pre-med courses. Duke did not require a bachelor's degree for admission to medical school, but students could earn a bachelor's degree in medicine en route to the doctorate in medicine if they conducted research while in medical school, an option John would take.

Entrance to medical school, of course, involved an interview. In this case, John's interviewer was Wilburt Davison, MD, the founding dean of the medical school and a Rhodes scholar. For John, the interview marked the beginning of medical school and of an important and lifelong friendship. At Oxford, Dr Davison had studied with Sir William Osler, considered by many to be the founder of modern medicine. The mentorship of Dr Davison and the legacy of Sir William Osler would profoundly affect John throughout his life.

John loved medical school. The intensity of an accelerated program, the complexity of the topics, and the long days and short nights challenged him intellectually and physically. He was also becoming interested in research, and not just because it would complete his bachelor's degree. Duke was one of many universities that offered the Borden Prize for Medical Research, which was awarded to medical students with the best original research project completed in the final year of study. (The award was created by *the* Borden, the one who developed condensed milk just before the Civil War and started what became the Borden Food Company. The company ceased operations in 2001.) The \$500 prize (about \$7,500 today) was actually less important than the prestige of winning the award.

John, who was becoming interested in pediatrics, decided to study a particular aspect of pertussis. Before bacteriologists Pearl Kendrick, ScD and Grace Eldering, PhD developed a vaccine, pertussis was the deadliest childhood

disease at the time. However, in the early 1940s, the vaccine was given only to children older than 6 years. John helped develop a test to determine whether infants 3 to 6 months old would produce antibodies to the *Bordetella pertussis* bacterium and thus be eligible for the vaccination.³ This award made John Duke University's first recipient of the Borden Award. From then on, he always found time to conduct his own research as part of his practice of medicine.

POSTGRADUATE TRAINING AND TEACHING

From Duke, John—now John P. McGovern, MD—began an internship in pediatrics at Yale-New Haven General Hospital in 1945. After the first year, however, he was called for active duty in the US Army and served in veterans' hospitals from 1946 through 1948. During this time, he worked in rehabilitation medicine during the day and worked at night helping 2 local pediatricians in private practice, an experience he enjoyed and would come back to later in life.

After leaving the Army in 1948, John returned to Duke to complete a residency in pediatrics. Eventually, Dean Davison offered him a fellowship that included a year of study in Europe, first at Guy's Hospital in London, then at the *Hôpital des Enfants Malades* in Paris. During this year, he developed a strong interest in the history of medicine, which in 1996 would result in a bequest that established the John P. McGovern Historical Collections and Research Center at the Texas Medical Center Library.

When John returned from his year abroad, he had received probably the best training in pediatrics at the time. In 1949, he accepted a position at the George Washington University School of Medicine. A year later, he was an Assistant Professor and Chief of Pediatrics at the university's affiliated hospital, the Children's Hospital of the District of Columbia.

In 1951, he received a rare and coveted John and Mary R. Markle Scholar Award. In its 22 year history, the award was given to only 500 physicians. The 5 year, \$30,000 award covered research expenses for talented young physicians who wished to stay in academic medicine rather than move into private practice. However, his increasing workload at the hospital and especially administrative tasks meant less time for research and more time completing paperwork. It took the threat of a promotion that would mean even more paperwork to persuade him to take his award and move on.

Once again, Dr Davison worked the networks and discovered an allergist at Tulane University in New Orleans who was looking for someone with John's training. So, in 1954, John took a position as assistant professor at Tulane University and went to work in Charity Hospital.

Charity Hospital had been providing indigent care in New Orleans since 1736. Moved and rebuilt several times, it was chronically underfunded. The situation was made worse in the 1930s when the governor decreed that the hospital would serve *all* of the state's indigent patients. In 1936, the hospital logged almost 75,000 admissions, making it the busiest hospital in the country with some of the most challenging patients.

Some 20 years later, in the mid-1950s, the workload was better but remained heavy. The hospital had 3,300 beds but treated as many as 4,500 patients on a given day. Children were put 2 to a bed, and adults were put on gurneys between standard beds, so a 20-bed ward functionally became a 40-bed ward. The outpatient clinic saw 5,000 patients a day.

Still, John was able to conduct his Markle-related research after hours, although it made the days much longer, and he enjoyed his colleagues, who were dedicated physicians carrying the same workload. During this period, he decided to become an allergist and passed the American Medical Association's board examination without any advanced training in the field—then and now, a rare accomplishment—making him board-certified in both pediatrics and allergy. He remained at Tulane until 1956, when a favorite professor from medical school asked him to come to Houston where the potential for patient care, teaching, and research was good and getting better. So, at age 35, John moved to Houston.

THE MCGOVERN ALLERGY AND ASTHMA CLINIC

In the 1950s, flush with oil money, Houston was a rapidly growing city that attracted talented people from several fields, especially medicine. The M. D. Anderson Hospital and Tumor Center (now the University of Texas M. D. Anderson Cancer Center), the Baylor College of Medicine, the University of Texas Dental School at Houston, Baylor St. Luke's Medical Center, Rice University, and Texas Children's Hospital, among other institutions, were in various stages of development.

When John bought the practice of a retiring allergist, the McGovern Allergy Clinic was born. The practice flourished. Soon, the increased number of patients required hiring additional physicians. Their job interviews, all conducted by John himself, often went for 2 hours or more, and some applicants had 2 or even more interviews. During these interviews, they learned about John, Dr Davison, Duke University, and Osler's approach to medicine, among other things. The result of this hiring process was a close-knit staff of pediatric allergists who shared Osler's approach to

medicine and John's work ethic. During this period, he also formed the Texas Allergy Research Foundation.

One new employee caught John's attention. Hired as an office manager, Kathy Galbreath proved a most capable worker who could also cope with her employer's perfectionism and work schedule. The 2 were married in 1961. When asked to name the highlights of his life, John would provide a standard answer: his friendship with Dean Davison, the



John P. (1921-2007) and Kathrine G. McGovern. (Used with permission from the John P. McGovern Foundation.)

influence of Osler, the day he quit smoking in 1963, the day he quit drinking in 1984, and his marriage to Kathy. But, he always added, "not necessarily in that order."

John initially held faculty appointments at Baylor College of Medicine and at the University of Texas Postgraduate School of Medicine. He eventually served for 22 years as Chief of the pediatrics department's allergy section at Baylor and for 16 years as Chief of Allergy Services at Texas Children's Hospital. He was also a professor at the University of Texas at Houston and Chair of the University's Department of the History of Medicine.

After 15 years, thanks to quality care and good business practices, the McGovern clinic had become the largest private allergy clinic in the country.⁴ John also shrewdly invested in real estate, at one time owning much of the land that would eventually be occupied by the world's largest medical complex, The Texas Medical Center. (Today, the center occupies nearly 2 square miles, is home to some 60 institutions, and employs more than 100,000 people.)⁵ In addition, he also successfully invested in stocks, eventually becoming quite wealthy. In 1961, he had created what would become the John P. McGovern Foundation with \$10,000. At the time of his death, the foundation had \$180 million in assets.

PROFESSIONAL CONTRIBUTIONS

In addition to practicing medicine, John remained a committed educator and researcher throughout his career. He wrote more than 250 articles and 26 books in the medical sciences and humanities, was president or chief elected

officer of 15 professional medical societies,⁶ served on the editorial boards of numerous journals, and received dozens of awards.

Box. Prestigious Awards Received by John During His 43 Year Career^{1,6}

- The American Medical Association's Special Award for Meritorious Service.
- The William A. Howe Award, the highest honor given by the American School Health Association
- A Private Sector Initiative Commendation, bestowed by President Ronald Reagan, for his lifetime of service in medicine and philanthropy
- The Outstanding Scholarship in Health Care Award from the American Association of Colleges of Nurses
- The Surgeon General's Medal for his lifetime of service, bestowed by Dr C. Everett Koop, at the time, the Surgeon General of the United States
- The R. Brinkly Smithers Gold Medal Award for outstanding work and support in the field of alcoholism and drug abuse, from the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence
- The Maurice Hirsch Award for Philanthropy
- The Royal Medallion of the Polar Star from Sweden
- L'Ordre National du Mérite from France
- The Kemal Atatürk Gold Medal Distinguished Service Award bestowed by the Government of Turkey, and the first received by an American citizen
- Houston's 2001 Distinguished Citizen of the Year
- The Distinguished Alumnus Award from Duke University
- Fellow, American Association for the Advancement of Science
- Fellow, American College of Physicians
- Honorary Fellow, Royal College of Physicians
- Distinguished Fellow, American Association of Allergy, Asthma, and Immunology
- Fellow, American Society of Addiction Medicine

A member of AMWA's Southwest Chapter since 1961, John became an AMWA Fellow in 1967 and received the Association's highest honor, the Harold Swanberg Distinguished Service Award, in 1988.

During 1968 to 1969, John was president of the American College of Allergists (now the American College of Allergy, Asthma, and Immunology) and was Editor-in-Chief of the college's journals. During his presidency, the college was struggling to achieve a new status as an independent medical specialty, with its own special training requirements and board-certification process. John was instrumental in directing the development of the college's application to American Medical Association's Advisory Board for Medical Specialties. The field became a certified specialty in 1974.

In the late 1960s, John and a Washington, DC physician named Alfred Henderson independently became concerned that the emphasis on science in medical education would supplant the study of the humanities. When Dr Davison brought the 2 men together, they founded The American Osler Society in 1970 to memorialize Osler's life and teachings. The John P. McGovern Academy of Oslerian Medicine was created in 2001 with a \$5 million gift to provide endowments for 5 William Osler Scholars, an amount later augmented with a second gift of \$2.5 million.

Also, in the tradition of Sir William Osler, John worked to support medical libraries. In 1970, he was appointed by President Richard Nixon to the board of the National Library of Medicine. He was Chairman of the Board of Regents of the Library from 1970 to 1974 and chaired the external grants program after leaving the board. He also served on the National Advisory Council of the National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism from 1987 to 1991.

Several awards have been established in his name, among them, The Houston Academy of Medicine's John P. McGovern Compleat Physician Award and from the Office of the President of The University of Texas Medical Branch, the annual John P. McGovern Lifetime Achievement Award in Oslerian Medicine.

PHILANTHROPIC ACTIVITIES

John was as skillful in giving money away as he was in making it. The John P. McGovern Foundation continues to fund scholarships, lectureships, endowed professorships, distinguished faculty awards, and buildings to advance medical science throughout the country. It donated \$6.5 million to create a new McGovern-Davison Children's Center at Duke University and \$75 million to the University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston (UTHealth) and its medical school, which was renamed the John P. and Kathrine G. McGovern Medical School.⁷ The foundation funded UTHealth's McGovern Center for Humanities and Ethics and the McGovern Historical Center, which houses collections on the history of medical specialties, Texas medicine, North American public health, the development of the institutions and hospitals in the Texas Medical Center in Houston, and biographical information on Texas physicians. The foundation has also endowed 26 annual Award Lectureships at universities in Texas and elsewhere, including Duke, Harvard, Yale, the C. Everett Koop Institute at Dartmouth College, and Green College at Oxford University.

The foundation has also established several public Houston landmarks, including McGovern Lake and the John P. McGovern Children's Zoo in Hermann Park, and

was a major donor in the early days of what became the McGovern Museum of Health and Medical Science. In 2017, a \$20 million endowment created the Kathrine G. McGovern College of the Arts at the University of Houston,⁸ the first college in the university to be named after a former student and also the first to be named after a woman.

CLOSING

By all accounts, John was a talented physician, teacher, and researcher. He was also personable, foresighted, deliberate, driven, and above all, generous with his time as well as with his fortune.⁹ He made life better for hundreds of thousands of children, medical students, patients, colleagues, and members of the public. In so doing, he, as always, was taking one of Osler's principles to heart, "we are here to add what we can to life, not to get what we can from life."¹⁰

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