

THE NEW YORK OBSTETRICAL SOCIETY

TUESDAY 12/8/81

TO ENCAPSULATE A MAN'S LIFE AND CAREER IN A SHORT STATEMENT SEEMS IMPOSSIBLE, FOR ANY MAN WHO GAVE OF HIMSELF AS DR. BURNHAM DID, DESERVES FAR MORE THAN MY WORDS CAN SAY.

DR. BURNHAM WAS BORN IN BROOKLYN NEW YORK IN 1902. A TRUE NEW YORKER HE GRADUATED FROM CORNELL UNIVERSITY IN 1923 AND CORNELL MEDICAL COLLEGE IN 1926. HE THEN RETURNED TO BROOKLYN AND INTERNEED AT THE BROOKLYN HOSPITAL FOR 2 YEARS AFTER WHICH HE WENT TO THE WOMEN'S HOSPITAL AS JR. ASSISTANT, SR. ASSISTANT AND FINALLY HOUSE SURGEON, SPECIALIZING IN OBSTETRICS AND GYNECOLOGY. HE PRACTICED IN BROOKLYN FOR ONE YEAR BEFORE MOVING TO NEW JERSEY WHERE HE JOINED THE STAFF OF THE ENGLEWOOD HOSPITAL. HE WAS BOARD CERTIFIED IN OBSTETRICS AND GYNECOLOGY IN 1940. FROM 1934-1948 HE WAS ASSISTANT ATTENDING SURGEON AT WOMEN'S HOSPITAL, N.Y.

IN THE 1940's BECAUSE OF DR. BURNHAM'S DEDICATION, CONCERN AND AWARENESS OF HIS PATIENTS HE OBSERVED AN IMPORTANT PHENOMENA WHICH HE PUBLISHED IN 1941. THE ARTICLE WAS ENTITLED "THE COMMON ETIOLOGY OF ERYTHROBLASTOSIS AND TRANSFUSION ACCIDENTS IN PREGNANCY" AND IT APPEARED IN THE AMERICAN JOURNAL OF OBSTETRICS & GYNECOLOGY-SEPTEMBER, 1941.

THIS LITTLE KNOWN, BUT SIGNIFICANT CONTRIBUTION TO THE Rh STORY, WENT UNNOTICED FOR MANY YEARS. IT WAS NOT UNTIL 1973 WITH THE PUBLICATION OF A BOOK ENTITLED "Rh-THE INTIMATE HISTORY OF A DISEASE AND ITS CONQUEST" BY DAVID ZIMMERMAN THAT DR. BURNHAM WAS FINALLY ACCORDED HIS DUE CREDIT. SHORTLY THEREAFTER I MET DR. BURNHAM IN THE HOSPITAL AND ASKED HIM HOW HE WAS FEELING AND - WITH A GARISH SMILE - HE REPLIED "VINCE I'VE NEVER FELT BETTER IN MY LIFE - YOU KNOW THAT Rh BOOK HAS GIVEN ME A NEW LEASE ON LIFE"!

THIS GIVES YOU AN IDEA OF HOW IMPORTANT TO HIM, WAS THIS SIMPLE RECOGNITION OF HIS CONTRIBUTION - TO OTHERS NOT INVOLVED THIS MAY SEEM TRIVIAL, BUT TO THE PERSON DIRECTLY INVOLVED IT IS ALL IMPORTANT, AND SO IT WAS WITH LYMAN BURNHAM.

IN ORDER TO PUT HIS CONTRIBUTION INTO HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE, WE HAVE TO GO BACK A NUMBER OF YEARS TO THE PERIOD BETWEEN 1937 AND 1941, JUST BEFORE THE Rh FACTOR ITSELF WAS DISCOVERED. IT WAS DURING THIS PERIOD THAT THE LUMINARIES IN BLOOD RESEARCH SUCH AS DR. LANDSTEINER, DR. WIENER AND DR. LEVINE BEGAN TO UNRAVEL THE MYSTERY SURROUNDING AN UNKNOWN BLOOD FACTOR WHICH WAS CAUSING SEVERE BLOOD TRANSFUSION REACTIONS. THE STILLBIRTHS THAT WERE ASSOCIATED WITH THESE TRANSFUSION REACTIONS WENT COMPLETELY UNNOTICED. STILLBIRTHS WERE NOT REMARKABLE NEITHER FOR THE MOST PART WERE THEY RIGOROUSLY STUDIED. TO BLOOD RESEARCHERS ESPECIALLY, THEY WERE OF LITTLE INTRINSIC INTEREST.

NOT SO FOR DR. BURNHAM WHO AS AN OBSTETRICIAN WAS VERY MUCH CONCERNED ABOUT THE ASSOCIATION OF STILLBIRTHS AND MATERNAL TRANSFUSION ACCIDENTS. AUTOPSIES CONFIRMED THAT THE STILLBIRTHS WERE DUE TO A CONDITION RECOGNIZED AS "ERYTHROBLASTOSIS", HOWEVER THE CAUSATIVE AGENT RESPONSIBLE, REMAINED AS YET UNKNOWN. DR. BURNHAM'S VITAL AND UNCONTESTED CONTRIBUTION RESIDES ON HIS UNRELENTING BELIEF THAT THE SIMULTANEOUS OCCURENCE OF ERYTHROBLASTOSIS AND MATERNAL TRANSFUSION REACTIONS WERE DEFINITELY CO-RELATED AND NOT MERELY COINCIDENTAL.

HE RELAYED THIS BELIEF TO DR. LEVINE BUT, WAS UNABLE TO CONFIRM IT. AS DR. BURNHAM WITNESSED ADDITIONAL CASES OF ERYTHROBLASTOSIS AND UNEXPLAINED MATERNAL TRANSFUSION REACTIONS, HE BECAME MORE CONVINCED THAT HIS THEORY WAS CORRECT. AND HE PROBABLY CONVINCED DR. LEVINE AS WELL. SUBSEQUENTLY THE Rh ANTIGEN WAS IDENTIFIED BY LANDSTEINER AND WIENER, AT ABOUT THE SAME TIME THAT DR. LEVINE POSTULATED THE CORRECT MECHANISM OF THE DISEASE.

DR. LEVINE PUBLISHED HIS THEORY, AND DATA TO SUPPORT IT IN THE JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION ON MARCH 1, 1941. DR. LYMAN BURNHAM AND DR. EUGENE KATZIN WERE COAUTHORS OF THAT PAPER.

AS A FURTHER ACKNOWLEDGEMENT FOR HIS CONTRIBUTION, THE BRITISH BROADCASTING COMPANY, IN 1979, CAME TO NEW YORK TO FILM A DOCUMENTARY ON Rh DISEASE. DR. BURNHAM WAS NOT ONLY INTERVIEWED BUT FILMED AS WELL - THIS FILM BEING SHOWN THROUGHOUT THE WORLD.

DR. BURNHAM WAS A MEMBER OF THE NEW YORK OBSTETRICAL SOCIETY FOR MANY YEARS. HE WAS ALSO A MEMBER OF THE BERGEN COUNTY MEDICAL SOCIETY, THE MEDICAL SOCIETY OF NEW JERSEY, THE AMERICAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION, THE NEW JERSEY OBSTETRICAL & GYNECOLOGICAL SOCIETY AND THE ENGLEWOOD SURGICAL SOCIETY.

HE BELONGED TO THE KNICKERBOCKER COUNTRY CLUB, THE ENGLEWOOD FIELD CLUB, THE ENGLEWOOD CLUB, AND THE LAKE PLACID CLUB. AT CORNELL HE WAS A MEMBER OF THE CROSS-COUNTRY TRACK TEAM AND BELONGED TO PHI DELTA THETA.

HE AND HIS WIFE FLORENCE, WHO SURVIVES HIM, WERE MARRIED 52 YEARS AND UNTIL HIS ILLNESS THEY WERE ACTIVE IN ICE DANCING, SKIING AND TOOK BALLROOM DANCE LESSONS TOGETHER.

DR. LYMAN BURNHAM DIED OF CANCER ON OCTOBER 3, 1981. WE MOURN HIS PASSING, HOWEVER HIS CONTRIBUTION TO MEDICAL RESEARCH WILL LIVE ON IN THE ANNALS OF MEDICAL HISTORY.

VINCENT J. FREDI, M.D.