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James Polson oral history interview by Yael V. Greenberg, August 14, 2003

James Polson (Interviewee)

Yael V. Greenberg (Interviewer)

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USF Florida Studies Center
Oral History Program
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TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

Year of arrival

Dr. Polson came to USF in 1971 as an assistant professor of pharmacology.

Circumstances that brought him to USF and the reasons he came

In 1971 Dr. Donn Smith was just beginning a medical school at USF. He was the dean and there were about a dozen faculty members recruited. Dr. Andor Szentivanyi was appointed chairman of pharmacology. He recruited Dr. Polson. "The prospect of beginning a medical school from the ground up was exciting." There were a lot of uncertainties at that time. Funding was not guaranteed to even complete the medical school. The dean and his staff had put in grants. Dr. Szentivanyi had recruited one other assistant professor, Dr. Krzanowski, who came from Washington University in St. Louis. Dr. Polson came from University of Minnesota in Minneapolis. Dr. Szentivanyi was interested in both Dr. Polson and Dr. Krzanowski's research experience. Dr. Szentivanyi had plans to study some of the underlying patho-physiology of bronchial asthma. Dr. Polson and Dr. Krzanowski's background fit in to that pretty well. Dr. Polson was attracted to come to USF because of the excitement of beginning a medical school from the ground up and because of the prospect of doing research with Dr. Szentivanyi.

What attracted Dr. Polson to USF?

Dr. Polson says what attracted him to USF was "being able to participate in the building of a medical school, because medical education was something I thought was a very worthwhile endeavor, and to be part of the beginning of a medical school, develop its programs, be one of the first faculty on board, be able to grow, that was exciting to me." The other attraction for Dr. Polson was the possibility of doing research with Dr. Szentivanyi. Dr. Szentivanyi had a theory about the cause of asthma, which Dr. Polson and others were to explore.

What did the campus look like in 1971?

The first building he saw was the science center, which was four stories and relatively new at the time. It was close by the engineering school, which had its own building. There was the administration building, the old library building, and the UC. "There wasn't much student housing on campus." There were other buildings for liberal arts curriculum.

Medical school facilities

There were no medical school buildings when Dr. Polson arrived in 1971.

What did Dr. Szentivanyi say about USF and the medical school when he recruited Dr. Polson?

Dr. Szentivanyi told Dr. Polson that there was a great prospect for future development for the medical school at USF. Dr. Polson says one of Dr. Szentivanyi's major selling points was the medical microbiology research that he had been involved in with another researcher. They were putting together a core research group to conduct studies related to bronchial asthma. The research group was a major selling point for Dr. Polson. "We were getting the opportunity to do research as well as participate in the setting up of a medical school."

Medical school curriculum

The new faculty members had to design all the courses themselves.

Faculty members and departments

When Dr. Polson arrived, the medical school had four departments, each consisting of a chair and three faculty members. The departments were anatomy, medical microbiology, physiology, and pharmacology.

Teaching load of professors

The three faculty members in the pharmacology department, including Dr. Polson, team-taught the courses. Dr. Szentivanyi did invite a few guest lecturers from other universities to ease some of the load. "For young faculty members who had just emerged from training it was a big responsibility that was laid on us."

No time for research

"The first year or two we didn't have much time for research even though that was one of the features that Dr. S. emphasized when he was recruiting us." After the first year or two of setting up laboratories, Dr. Polson and his colleagues were able to begin research and make some findings in regards to Dr. Szentivanyi's theory of asthma.

Dean Smith

"He was a no-nonsense kind of person. He could be very charming at times, and very tough at times. He had his own vision of what the medical school should be like and how to get there." Dean Smith had participated before in the building of a medical school. "He was not very impressed with junior faculty members. They were people he needed for his project, but he didn't seem to have a real high regard for them—the Ph.D. faculty members that were just starting their career." "We walked a little bit lightly around him. We saw him quite a bit, much more than a faculty person would see the dean of a medical school today because we were all housed on the same floor of the science center, and our offices were not too far from his."

Recruiting medical students

The whole faculty of the medical school was involved in recruiting and interviewing new medical students, and in making the decision about which medical students should be admitted to the program.

Cecil Mackey's support of the medical school

The president of USF at the time was Cecil Mackey. He gave verbal support to the medical school. "He came over to talk to us two or three times [to] tell us he was committed to the medical school and that he would do everything needed to make it go forward."

Funding support

"The question we had about commitment to the medical school was whether the funding would be there from either the federal government or from the state government." Funding was made available for the beginning phases of the medical school, but no funding was in place to continue after the first few years. The funds to continue the medical school had to be applied and argued for mainly by Dr. Smith and his staff. He remembers the day that Dr. Smith announced that funding was approved by the legislature in Tallahassee. "It was a great relief and a great time of joy for the faculty."

Medical school interacts with community

The clinical faculty members that were recruited had more of a clinical aspect to their teaching and were involved in health services. The clinical faculty members were the ones on the forefront interacting with the local medical community. They were able to recruit many of the local physicians to become a part of the medical school faculty either as adjuncts or full-time faculty members.

Problems that the medical school dealt with in the early years (procurement, space, and a medical library)

Procurement was a real problem. At Dr. Polson's former institution, the University of Minnesota, when faculty needed supplies for research, they had a procurement system set up where faculty could get a purchase order number from the purchasing department, phone the vendor, and have things delivered by the next day. When he came to USF it took three months to get supplies delivered, such as test tubes, enzymes, chemicals, and very basic things. It took three months because the system at USF involved putting in an order for supplies to the purchasing department, who then accumulated orders over a month or two until they had a large number of orders. Then the purchasing department put the whole package out on bid to potential suppliers. It might take thirty more days for the bid to come in to the purchasing department. Then the department accepted the lowest bid. At times not all of the supplies to be ordered would in fact be ordered by the bid winner. If the company could not supply some of things needed, they would just scratch it out, and the procurement department sometimes accepted that. It took three or four months to get basic supplies to do research. Another challenge involved establishing a medical library since the needs of a medical faculty and medical students are specialized. They needed access to health science journals and books that were not available at the main campus library. Dr. Smith brought in a librarian to start a medical

school library. Also, space was a problem. “When phase I was built and we moved into that, the space problem was alleviated for a while. But, then as the medical school continued to grow in faculty size, even that space became pretty tight. Event today there is a need for more space for the medical school.”

Where was the medical school housed in 1971?

The science center housed the medical school, mostly on the fourth floor. There was a room in the basement for some laboratory equipment and offices. Dr. Polson had an office in the basement with two junior faculty members from medical microbiology. They tried to get things set up to do research in the laboratory, which they did, but, they were not able to get a lot of work done in the space.

The medical school moves

The medical school moved very shortly after its creation from the science center to what was called the surge building. The surge building was constructed for the medical school. It was a small one-story building near the science center. It housed some faculty members that were being recruited and provided a classroom for medical students. The medical school was in that building for one or two years until the medical school was built.

How many people were in the charter class

The first class consisted of twenty-four students.

Where was the charter class located on campus?

They were all in one classroom on the fourth floor of the science center. They had desks and a little bit of laboratory space with microscopes. They stayed in the room and the faculty from different departments came in and taught them in the classroom. When the Surge building was built, the charter class moved there.

Where did the first students come from?

Most of them came from the state of Florida, and a few came from states around the Southeast.

Dr. Polson describes the charter class

“They were excited to be the charter class of the medical school.” He remembers the class had a good spirited attitude. They also were challenged by the circumstances they found themselves in with a brand new medical school, and with programs that were not tried and true, but were just starting out with them. “They were in a sense guinea pigs.” “Many of the faculty that taught them were fresh out of Ph.D. programs or post-doctoral programs. They didn’t have a lot of teaching experience. The amount of material they had to learn, as with any medical school, is just enormous. There’s a lot of stress.”

Medical students play hockey between classes

They would have breaks between classes on the fourth floor of the science center. They got the idea to have hockey games during breaks. They had wads of paper for hockey pucks, and brooms or other kinds of sticks for hockey sticks. “They went to town and

had a great time during the ten minute breaks between classes. [They] left off steam.” After an exam the students went out together for a pizza or movie. Sometimes Dr. Krzanowski and Dr. Polson were invited to go out with the students.

Why did students want to attend USF’s medical school?

One reason they may have wanted to come to USF for medical school was because it was less expensive than other schools, and for a lot of people it was closer to home, where they lived, or where they grew up.

Accreditation

“That [accreditation] was a major hurdle we had to cross. Once we got accreditation there was a collective sigh on the part of the faculty. That was a milestone in our development.”

Second year class

The second class also consisted of twenty-four students. They went to the fourth floor of the medical center.

Interaction between faculty and staff and how it has changed over the years

Dr. Polson says in the early years the faculty members got to know the students very well. In the early days there was much more personal interaction between students and faculty then today with a medical student class of ninety-eight or one hundred students as opposed to twenty-four. On one occasion Dr. Krzanowski and Dr. Polson were invited a long with the first class of medical school students for pizza and a movie, “The Godfather.” Dr. Polson says this type of interaction between faculty and students is something that would not even be imagined today.

Medical school subjects taught

The subjects taught in the first year were anatomy, biochemistry, physiology, embryology, and histology. In the second year faculty also taught medical microbiology, pharmacology, and pathology.

What courses did Dr. Polson teach in the pharmacology department?

Medical pharmacology was the core course in the curriculum that the pharmacology department taught the medical students. It was a survey course of drugs available to treat diseases. The professors talked about the effects of certain drugs on the body and the biochemical and physiology mechanisms of action by which drugs produce their effects. They talked about how the human body absorbs, distributes, metabolizes, and excretes a drug. They also talked about the side effects, usages, and toxins of drugs. Dr. Polson says students had to be exposed to these kinds of things by the time they reached their clinical clerkships. It was the responsibility of the pharmacology department to help students learn and be familiar with the subject matter.

Clinical faculty non-existent at first

The faculty taught the first year medical school students without any clinical faculty members on board. The clinical faculty had to be at USF to teach the second and third

year of medical school, so the clinical faculty was recruited as the professors taught the first year medical students.

Where did students conduct clinicals?

Once the first class reached their clinical clerkships, they were held at Tampa General Hospital. Once the V.A. Hospital opened, it offered some facilities for the students.

Running out of room for faculty

As the medical school grew, some of the faculty was moved over to the research wing of the V.A. Hospital because there was not room for them on campus and the medical school had not been completed yet.

Phase I of the medical school

Phase I of the medical school was completed around 1974 or 1975. Phase I of the new medical school building contained anatomy laboratories, two large classrooms for the second year medical students, and offices and laboratories for the basic science faculty.

Phase II

After the completion of phase I, construction of phase II began. Phase II contained mainly laboratories and offices for clinical faculty.

A phase III existed in the original plans, different plans instead

Phase III in the original plans called for a teaching hospital. But, the circumstances that Dr. Smith found here in the medical and political communities made it best, in his opinion, to join forces with the medical community at Tampa General Hospital and have the hospital serve as the medical school's major teaching hospital. "It had the disadvantage of being fifteen miles from the main campus, but [we] had the advantage of having an already established hospital, and working medical community to interact with." Dr. Polson says having Tampa General Hospital as the teaching hospital helped garner more support for the medical school from the local medical community.

Program moves from four to three years

The transition from a four-year to a three-year curriculum occurred very early on in the medical school's existence. There was a national movement that favored a three-year curriculum. "The idea was that we could provide the community with doctors faster." USF had some classes of students graduating on a three-year curriculum. We found that putting the very demanding requirements for a medical curriculum in to a three-year time period was just more than the students needed to be expected to do. It caused a lot of stress among the students. They were fatigued." The medical school went back to a four-year curriculum. "I think the consensus across the country was that a four-year curriculum was a better choice."

Dr. Polson is the coordinator of pharmacology for graduate programs

His major responsibility as coordinator was the recruitment of graduate students. He tried several different approaches to recruit students. He made posters announcing the graduate program at USF, which he sent to various departments of biology and chemistry

around the state and the southeastern U.S. He occasionally sent faculty members to other undergraduate colleges in the state of Florida to give seminars and to explain the graduate program. There was a set of requirements that students had to meet in order to earn their Ph.D. degrees. It was his responsibility as associate dean of the graduate program to see that every student who entered the program and then graduated with their degree met certain requirements. He read the doctoral dissertations of all the students who graduated from the program. He assisted the faculty of other departments in any way that they needed, such as getting new courses through the hierarchy within the university.

In Dr. Polson's thirty-two years of history at USF, what are the biggest changes he has noticed in the College of Medicine?

One of the major changes in the College of Medicine involves its size. The class size has increased from about twenty-four to one hundred students. He thinks that currently about 120 students are accepted into the classes. The faculty increased from twelve members to hundreds of members. Also, research has flourished at the medical school. "When we came in 1971 the faculty was interested in research, but there was not a whole lot of infrastructure available for research." He says another major change is that USF now has a better ordering system for supplies and equipment. He sights another example of USF's ordering problems. Dr. Polson and others needed to use radioisotopes for some of their research. In order to use radioisotopes one has to have licenses and permits. At the University of Minnesota, where he came from, the administration took care of applying for licenses and seeing that all the requirements were met for keeping licenses. At USF, they had to find out who was in charge of applying for licenses. They were unable to find anyone in the directory. They asked around, but no one knew of anyone. They decided to call the campus operator to get connected with someone who worked in the radiation safety office. The campus operator connected them to the campus police because they were the only people she knew of that had anything to do with safety. "Of course they knew nothing about licensing for radioisotopes." "Now USF is very well equipped to oversee things like that. The infrastructure is in place for research. The amount of grant funding for research is in the millions."

What is Dr. Polson most proud of in his thirty-two years of history with USF?

He is most proud of "having a medical school here that is accredited and is now receiving national recognition for churning out good medical school students and medical doctors; [and] having a program where our medical M.D. graduates are able to compete for very good residences nationwide."

Where does he see the medical school in the next ten years?

The size is increasing even now, from about 100 to 120 students. That is going to be the upper limit we can take with the present facilities because the classrooms just won't hold anymore than about 120 medical students. There may be pressure to increase that class size even more but there will have to be some provision made to accommodate the larger numbers of students. I think the grant funding of research and the publication of research is going to continue to increase over the next ten years. The medical school contributes a lot to USF's recognition as a major research university. I think that will continue to grow. Hopefully there will be additional building programs for both clinical facilities and

research facilities. Plans are on the drawing board for increased nursing and medical student clinical facilities. We are hoping that we will also be able to get more laboratory space for the faculty in the future.”

New facilities to be built

“There are plans on the drawing board for an interdisciplinary facility where students of nursing and medicine will be trained in the same clinical facility. In terms of research space there are not plans, but there are a lot of people wishing and hopefully plans will be made to expand that in the future.”

Any last words that Dr. Polson would like to leave behind about USF?

“In the short history we have had I think the progress has been remarkable. We are training first quality doctors and graduates. The effort that people put in, the risks that were taken by the early faculty and students, [have] really have paid off. We have a wonderful school and facility, and I’m just very pleased to have been a part of that.”

End of Interview