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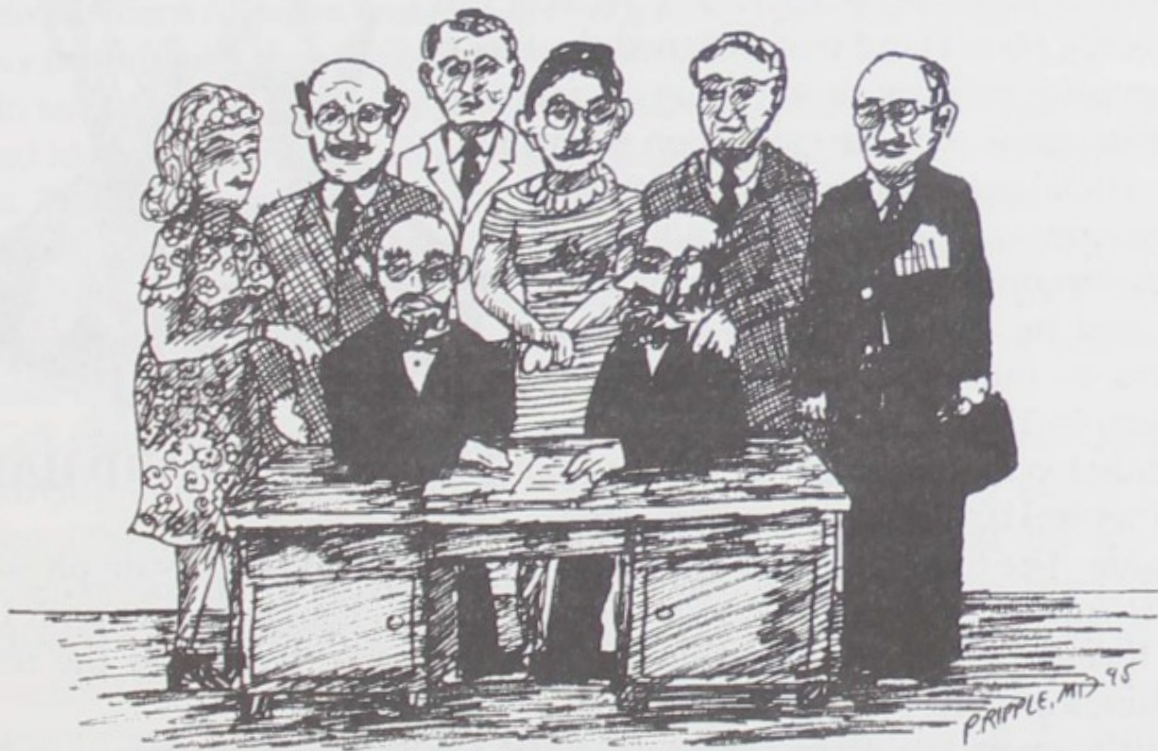


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Lancaster City & County Medical Society

## Section 3

# Prominent Physicians



## Chapter 33

### John B. Deaver, M.D.

#### *The Babe Ruth or P.T. Barnum of Medicine*

That title was bestowed upon Lancaster County's Dr. John B. Deaver by his daughter-in-law, Mrs. Priscilla Deaver Kelley, who had been married to Dr. Joshua Montgomery Deaver.

Dr. John B. Deaver was flamboyant in the operating room, exuded self-confidence in all that he did, had boundless energy, was a great showman in and out of the operating room and was an entertainer. He was dramatic in his teaching, a most skilled surgeon with phenomenal integrity. As a master teacher, he was also known as "The Professor."

When other surgeons in Philadelphia were doing cholecystostomies (opening and draining the gall-bladder), Dr. Deaver was performing cholecystectomies (removal of the gall-bladder).

He was the first surgeon to insist on frequent exploration of the bile ducts for stones.

He was especially proficient and outspoken in his teaching and management of appendicitis. He was a champion of early surgical intervention with the "aseptic scalpel." His alliterative description of the fate of a patient with this improperly treated disease was "pain, purgation, perforation, peritonitis, procession."

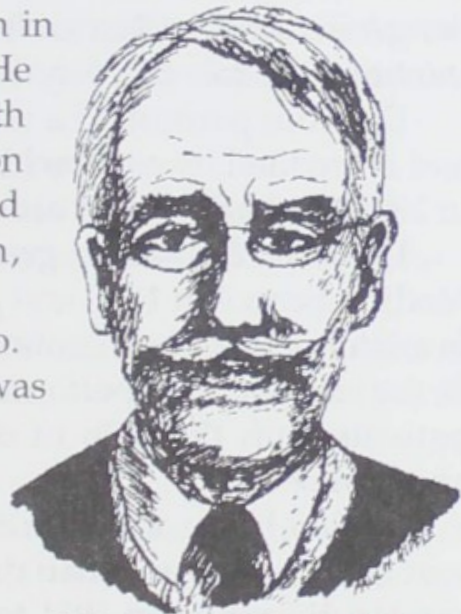
"Cut well, get well, stay well" was his motto.

One of the outstanding features of his career was his operative skill upon approximately 15,000 people stricken with appendicitis. During his long career he performed thousands of surgical procedures which contributed to the well-being of innumerable patients.

This is the same physician who would ride in his chauffeur driven automobile down Broad Street in Philadelphia and hand out cigars to the policeman directing traffic at each intersection.

At other times he would exclaim, "Who does more surgery than John B. Deaver?" And then he would answer his rhetorical question, "The Mayo brothers because there are two of them." He was his own marketing agent for trauma and surgical intervention.

Surgeons and physicians from all over the world would flock to watch him operate at his clinic at Lankenau Hospital. During surgical conventions in or around Philadelphia in the early 20th century, some physicians found difficulty getting into the surgical amphitheatre because of his popularity.



**DR. JOHN B. DEAVER**

Dr. Deaver contributed 248 articles on various subjects to medical journals in addition to his books on appendicitis, the breast, prostate, and surgery on the upper abdomen.

John B. Deaver was born on July 25, 1855 near The Buck. He was the son of Dr. Joshua Deaver.

Dr. Joshua Deaver came to The Buck, a strategic intersection in southern Lancaster County, to practice medicine after his graduation from the University of Maryland Medical School in 1843. He practiced and served this community for over 50 years and became quite a renowned and celebrated physician in this area.

He was known as the "Father of Physicians" because he had four sons, three of whom became physicians. The other son became the president of a university in Ohio attended by the Wright Brothers. The two other physician sons were also surgeons in Philadelphia and remained bachelors.

John Deaver attended Nottingham Academy for his early education, and later taught in country schools in southern Lancaster County to help pay for his medical education.

Listening to his father and another prominent physician in this area, Dr. Benjamin Sides, as they rode about the countryside, he became interested in pursuing the role of a physician.

Dr. Sides performed a great deal of surgery in the homes of his patients, and is credited by some with doing the first appendectomy for appendicitis in 1890. He had learned his surgical skills during the Civil War.

Dr. John B. Deaver graduated from the University of Pennsylvania Medical School in 1878 and practiced in Philadelphia. He was an instructor in anatomy with the intention that this training would lead him into surgery. In the early days he performed many surgical procedures in the home of his patients with the help of one of his brothers. Another surgeon was the anesthetist.

In 1886, he associated with Philadelphia's German Hospital, whose name was changed to Lankenau during World War I to honor its greatest benefactor. He did return in 1911 to the University of Pennsylvania to assume the post of Professor of Surgery when Dr. J. Wm. White retired because of his health.

Retirement age was extended twice to allow Dr. Deaver to remain the John Rhea Barton Professor.

Dr. John B. Deaver's daughter-in-law tells several stories about him in a personal communication given to the Mutter Museum in Philadelphia.

She recalled that he operated on all of his children, feeling he could do a better job than anyone else.

His working day began with rounds at the hospital at 6 A.M. He returned home for breakfast and then saw patients in the office. The rest of the day consisted of operations - sometimes 15-17.

He had no interest in social life. He had a phone at his dining room table and would frequently use it during meals.

Mrs. Deaver bought a peninsula on the coast of Maine and built a lovely home minus electricity and telephone, so her husband could get away from the turmoil of his practice. She even bought a boat and hired a captain. He would be there one week and become restless, find a pay phone, and phone the hospital and tell her that he had to return for an emergency.

Another story recounts how Dr. Deaver was called to Pittsburgh to see the famous actress and singer, Lillian Russell. He entered her room with a parade of young physicians trailing. He examined her abdomen which was greatly distended, and said to the residents, "Roll her, boys, from side to side."

He stepped outside of the room. There soon was a loud explosion and he was heard to say, "That's the most expensive fart she's ever had."

In his early days, Dr. Deaver was chief of surgery at St. Agnes Hospital. The nurses wore their traditional black habit. He informed them that the black robes were too unsanitary and either they would wear white robes or he would discontinue operating there.

One late night the doorbell rang. Dr. Deaver stuck his head from the upstairs window to inquire what was wanted. Four sisters from St. Agnes Hospital cried, "Please come right away. We have a terribly sick man and we need you to operate immediately."

Dr. Deaver asked, "What about your white robes?"

"Oh yes," they said, "All of us have white robes and will wear them."

This master teacher, known as "The Professor," died in 1931.