Obituaries

JOHN F. MAHONEY, M.D.

1889-1957

John F. Mahoney died of a cerebral hemorrhage on Feb. 23, 1957, at the age of 67. His death ended the career of a devoted public health servant who will long be remembered for his discovery of penicillin therapy for syphilis.

Dr. Mahoney was a graduate of Milwaukee University and of Marquette College of Medicine. He received his M.D. degree in 1914 and interned for two years in the Milwaukee County Hospital and the Chicago Lying-In Hospital. In 1917 he was commissioned a medical officer in the United States Public Health Service, where he served until December, 1949. Beginning in 1925, he represented the Public Health Service as adviser to the United States Foreign Service. In this capacity he worked for four years in Haiti, Ireland, England, and Germany, and studied laboratory and clinical methods of syphilis control in these countries.

In 1929 he was appointed Director of the Venereal Disease Research Laboratory of the Public Health Service in the U. S. Marine Hospital in Stapleton, Staten Island. He held this post for 20 years. In addition to becoming one of the leading authorities on serologic tests for syphilis, he engaged in much experimental syphilis research in rabbits and published numerous papers on the results of his experiments. At the same time he was able to keep in touch with the clinical management of syphilis and gonorrhea in hospital patients. Early in 1943 he discovered that the Treponema pallidum was sensitive to penicillin. Unable at that time to obtain sufficient penicillin for trials in treating patients, he grew the mold in his laboratory and manufactured his own penicillin. The results of his penicillin treatment of early syphilis in 25 patients revolutionized antisyphilitic therapy.

This discovery won for him the Lasker Award of the American Public Health Association in 1946. He also received awards from the Association of Military Surgeons, the American Social Hygiene Association, the National Association of Venereologists in Mexico, and the National Federation of Medicine in Guatemala.

While with the Public Health Service, Dr. Mahoney served on committees of numerous public and private health agencies. He was chairman of the Committee of Experts on Venereal Diseases of the World Health Organization and also chairman of the Committee for Standardization of Serologic Tests for Syphilis and of the Committee on Research and Standards of the American Public Health Association.

On retirement from the Public Health Service in 1949, Dr. Mahoney became Director of the Bureau of Laboratories of the New York City Health Department, and soon afterwards he was appointed Health Commissioner of New York City. In 1954 he resigned his position as Commissioner of Health and requested that he be assigned to his former duties as Director of the Bureau of Laboratories. His greatest interest was always in the laboratory.

Essentially a modest and kindly man, Dr. Mahoney was accessible to anyone needing help of the kind that he could give, and he was always ready to serve in humble capacities as well as in high positions. His death is a loss to laboratory research, to public health, and to his many friends within and outside of medicine. He is survived by his widow, a son and a daughter, and five sisters.

EVAN W. THOMAS, M.D.

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