60th Annual Pediatric Symposium

We are pleased to welcome everyone to our 60th Pediatric Symposium. These naught-numbered symposia, as always, offer us a moment to reflect on our past and be amazed and pleased as to how we got here. How a group, originally shunned at its inception by the fee-for-service medical community and its medical societies, forged ahead, by dint of excellence and an unwavering commitment to life-long learning, to a place in time where we stand at the threshold of welcoming our first class of medical students in 2019 to our newly founded Kaiser Permanente School of Medicine. An extraordinary event in our collective history! How fitting that we welcome to this year’s conference Dr. Mark Schuster, the Founding Dean of the Medical School, to grace us with his keynote address on the past and future of medical education.

In celebration of the 60th Annual Symposium, we reprint a comprehensively researched and beautifully written article by Bryan Culp\* for our 50th Symposium, recording the historic basis for Kaiser’s educational vision that led up to the creation of our own Pediatric Symposium. It is as relevant today as when it was first written ten years ago. We encourage you to read the breathtaking and inspiring events of our early history.

To reflect on some of the “inside” history of our symposia, we present a brief, intimate view of those first 59 years. There are so many new pediatricians who may not be that familiar with the efforts of those early years and the giants within the Group who had a vision of the educational culture that SCPMG would embrace and nurture. It also gives us an opportunity to recall names of those who were dear to us and whom we recall fondly.

It began in 1953, when Dr. Ray Kay and 16 physician associates organized the Southern California Permanente Medical Group (SCPMG). They immediately set about developing an educational ethos within our group, one of life-long learning and of excellence in education. In addition to designating one-half day per week for education (it subsequently became two half-days, only to be modified later), they conceived of offering yearly collegial conferences for each specialty. At that time, there were only three Kaiser Medical Areas, Fontana (the first) and Sunset, both with hospitals, and Harbor City.

Our first symposium was in 1955. We began big. Dr. Sam Sapin, the first Chief of Pediatrics at Panorama City, invited his former Chief, the legendary Dr. Horace Hodes, the most prominent national name in pediatric infectious disease & immunology, former Chair of Pediatrics at Columbia and then Chief at Mt. Sinai Hospital in New York. Dr. Hodes had a visceral fear of flying, but his desire to attend, and the medical urgency of the time was great enough that he decided to take a 3-day train from NY to LA and back. The urgency? The unfolding of the dramatic events and implications of the Cutter polio vaccine tragedies of April 1955. This was the subject of SCPMG’s first Annual Pediatric Symposium. For those who may not be familiar with this grave episode, Cutter Laboratories of Berkeley, CA, had manufactured defectively inactivated Salk vaccine that infected 200,000 people with live polio virus: 70,000 became ill, 200 kids were permanently paralyzed, and 20 died. The incident sent the country spinning and within a month, the first mass vaccine program had to be abandoned. Dr. Hodes joined us that year to define the scope of the problem, help allay national fears, and help determine how to restart the national goal of immunizing all children against polio despite this catastrophic event. His participation in our first symposia set a high bar as to the caliber of speakers that would grace our future symposia.

Truth be told, we cannot claim to be an “annual” symposium – though we do. Along the way, we lost 3 years, 1956, 1976, 1978, for a variety of reasons. Thus, our second symposium was held in 1957. Dr. Irwin Goldenberg, Chief of Pediatrics at Sunset, invited Drs. Robert Alway and Vincent Kelley from Minnesota, again at the Sunset facility. The “new” take was a post symposium party held at the home of Dr. Goldenberg, complete with food and a strolling guitarist – we knew for sure we were off and running. This remained the tradition (not the guitarist) for the next number of years.

The subsequent symposia were chaired on a rotational basis by pediatricians whose names have been lost to us, but in truth, were organized and managed by Shirley Gach, who wore many hats, and was the first de facto symposium coordinator. For those first 9 years, the meetings continued to be held on Saturday and Sunday at Sunset Medical Center where invited speakers rounded and held formal and informal talks with the pediatricians over the 2 days. They were housed by the rotating chairs.

You can read the names of those early speakers in your retiree booklet. Included are medical pioneers and visionaries, editors of journals, department chiefs, and seminal players in their respective fields, now long gone: Vince Kelly, pituitary and adrenal hormones in children; Wolfgang Zuelzer, pediatric hematology and Oncology; William Silverman, neonatal medicine; Robert Good, modern immunology; Albert Sabin, polio vaccine; Jerome Lejeune, genetics; Frank Oski, pediatric hematology,; Sydney Gellis, one of the great pediatric generalists, and many, many more. Their medical stature gave us collective pride in our Group by dint of their participation.

By 1963, the symposia had grown in size and scope, and a more formal approach was needed to support the symposia. That year, the Department of Education & Research was formed. In 1964, Shirley was formally named Regional Coordinator. Sometime later, Dr. John Fuerth, hematologist and Chief at Panorama City, proposed that a committee be convened for the purpose of future symposia development, composed of a Chair, the Chiefs of Pediatrics, and one representative from each of the Medical Areas (as administrative demands increased, most of the Chiefs dropped out, but the rest of the committee structure remains fairly intact to this day). Dr. Billie Moore was formally elected first Pediatric Symposium Chair.

Billie chaired the 1965 symposium, our 10th “Annual”. It had one overarching topic: Pediatric Neurology. Five nationally known speakers were invited, and it was held, for the first time, in a new venue, the Hotel Continental in Los Angeles. As we continued to grow, we relied heavily on central Los Angeles hotels such as the Continental, Ambassador, and the Los Angeles Hilton, some long gone. As the number of regions in Southern California increased, there was a demand for rotation of symposia locations. Our first such outreach was in 1980, to the Sheraton Anaheim. Not a good choice! The City of Anaheim, revamping their water system, shut off water to the city during the night and early morning hours of the conference – there were no happy campers! In 1982, we first went to San Diego for a very successful symposium, and subsequently we added Costa Mesa, La Jolla, Pasadena, Santa Monica, Long Beach, and Palm Springs.

The symposia have always been open to community pediatricians and house staff of all major teaching institutions in the Los Angeles and San Diego areas. There have been years when attendance topped 400 attendees. Because of our ever-expanding group, the growth of subspecialties, the emergence of the internet, and the question of pharmaceutical support, some necessary changes were made. The unspoken understanding of our early founders was that these yearly symposia would be part of the SCPMG educational experience and would be offered at no charge. This held for almost 50 years, until 1999, when the first registration fee of $50 was imposed to an audible outcry from the group. Today, in retrospect, this seems like a mere trifle, but at the time it represented a tectonic shift in the philosophy behind the symposia. We accepted the new reality, and once again learned that, time, and a small dose of Pepcid, would calm the masses. We survived and went on to many more highly successful symposia.

Though there were many outstanding conferences throughout the years, one that is particularly memorable was the 43rd Pediatric Symposium in 2001 titled, “Tales from the Red Book,” honoring on his retirement, our late, beloved Dr. Mike Marcy, a giant in the field of infectious diseases, with a “festschpracht,” if you will, of ID topics presented by other giants in the field, all past and, at the time, present editors of the *Red Book*: Drs. Jerome Klein, Georges Peter, Georges McCracken, Jr., Gary Overturf, Michael Gerber, Larry Pickering, and Noni MacDonald. Not a germ survived that one!

Dr. Billie Moore would chair for 27 years, from 1965 to 1992 (Billie passed on September 21, 2009 at age 82; she practiced pediatric medicine at Long Beach/South Bay Kaiser for 52 years!). She was kind enough to ask me to chair after, and I began in 1993 until 2009, the year of her passing. In 1988, Joyce Boyd became our second long-term symposium coordinator and helped sustain us for the next 28 years. In 2017, Amy Tam became our current pediatric symposium coordinator.

After my 17 years as Chair, Dr. Robert “Bo” Riewerts, our Coordinating Pediatric Chief, became our 3rd Symposium Chair for 2010. After this, the position evolved into a multi-chair rotation, including Bo, from Drs. Sharon Peng and Victor Wong, to Drs. Cindy Baker, Shari Chevez, Edward Curry, Brian Chu, and William Pfeiffer. Drs. Cindy Baker and Bill Pfeiffer currently chair the symposium.

It is interesting to note that each chair brought their own take on the position, tempered by the input of the committee. For the most part, Dr. Moore favored single topic meetings and was able to draw the best national speakers to dissect the topic at hand: From the Newborn, to Immunology, to GI, Virology, Nephrology, Environmental Pediatrics, Hematology, ID, Critical Care, and many more. When I chaired, we generally mixed it up with a potpourri of topics, also presented by national experts, highlighting a Kaiser speaker at each conference, and held in an ever-expanding series of venues: Pasadena, Orange County, Long Beach, La Jolla, San Diego, and Palm Springs. Our current chairs have taken another approach, focusing on “Permanente medicine,” consisting of lectures describing our high level of care, as delivered by our own excellent speakers, while creating a forum for other outstanding pediatricians within our group to share medically related experiences. How appropriate now that we will be opening the doors to our own medical school established on the foundation of Permanente medicine. The new chairs have infused the symposia with a welcome new energy.

For all chairs and their respective committees, the goal has always been to present topics that are current, useful, as well as on the cutting edge of pediatric practice, and that underscore Kaiser Permanente’s commitment to ongoing medical education. All this in an environment where we can meet and greet our colleagues from other locales, bring our families, and enjoy a superb educational experience in a beautiful setting.

So, on behalf of past and present Chairs, we thank you for participating in our 60th Annual Pediatric Symposium, and urge you to have something to eat, enjoy your friends and family, and absorb this outstanding program.

Dr. Ben Fass

*Some of the information in this essay is based on prior articles and conversations with Drs. Billie Moore, Rudy Brody, Sam Sapin, Irv Klitzner, Erwin Goldenberg, John Fuerth, and Joyce Boyd. I am indebted to them all. BF*

\*Bryan Culp, a world-class Archivist and Historian, at the time (he left Kaiser a few years ago), Manager of Heritage Resources, National Program Office, Kaiser Foundation Health Plan, located in Northern California, helped us tell our story. With single-minded dedication, he flew down from the “North” and interviewed many of the seminal players involved in our past pediatric symposia, including Shirley Gach, Drs. Sam Sapin, Irv Klitsner, and Billie Moore. What follows is the best history of both our Group and our Symposia that I have read. We cannot thank Bryan enough for his efforts on our behalf.