



# The importance of the history of dermatology: An American viewpoint

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**Abstract** The history of dermatology is a significant aspect of the specialty, if only to put into perspective the development of the specialty. Early pioneers recorded the progress made in the specialty, as it became a separate discipline in the latter part of the 19th century. Periodically, dermatologic societies and meetings have shown interest by including sessions and exhibits on the specialty. Dermatology journals often have often included contributions on the advancement of the specialty. The History of Dermatology Society (HDS), French Society for the History of Dermatology (SFHD), and the European Society for the History of Dermatology and Venereology (ESHVDV) foster the historical approach of the discipline.

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## Introduction

The history of dermatology, as a discipline, has never achieved universal acceptance. Although few physicians would deny the role that the historical development of the specialty is worthy of attention, many would prefer to pass over the subject entirely. The story of the evolution of a medical specialty is worthy of attention and of being told, if only to review the reasons for the growth and progress of the discipline.<sup>1</sup>

## The development of specialties

Dermatology, like most medical specialties, did not emerge in the United States until the post–Civil War period, although there were physicians interested in diseases of the skin in the European centers of London, Paris, and Vienna earlier in the

19th century. While American medical education was only slowly developing, a few American physicians would recognize the need for more training. This would take the form of the grand tours of the great medical centers in Europe. Among such physicians crossing the Atlantic were Noah Worcester (1812–1847), who would write the first dermatology textbook in the United States, and Henry Daggett Bulkley (1804–1872), who gave the first lectures on skin diseases at the Broome Street Dispensary in New York in 1837.<sup>2</sup>

Scientific medicine had not developed sufficiently to warrant dividing itself into several different categories. Specialties, such as ophthalmology and otolaryngology, were created as a result of newly developed instrumentation.<sup>3</sup> Dermatology could be on its own, because it is a visual discipline, and diseases might be seen and recognized. The study of cutaneous diseases was joined, at least in the United States, for periods with syphilis and even genitourinary diseases. With the introduction of penicillin in 1943, dermatology would no longer need the connection with syphilology, and the surgical specialty of urology had long since gone on its own.<sup>4</sup> For other reasons, a separate specialty for venereal diseases would develop in the UK.

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Whether the umbrella of cutaneous maladies and venereal diseases would have reappeared is open to speculation and most unlikely. Louis A. Duhring (1845-1913) preferred the term “cutaneous medicine”<sup>5</sup> (Figure 1). Currently, dermatology departments may be called the department of dermatology and cutaneous biology, division of dermatology and cutaneous science, or the department of dermatology and cutaneous surgery, as examples of combined approaches. Without the benefit of an historical perspective, many aspects of the story of dermatology might have been lost.

## The history of medicine

Making the history of medicine relevant to the medical curriculum has been an age-old conundrum. Schools that once had a vigorous proponent for teaching the subject have allowed the course to lapse, as in the case of Tufts University School of Medicine in Boston, where the late Benjamin Spector (1893-1976)<sup>6</sup> (Figure 2), a strong advocate for the history of medicine, offered an elective for many years (Pinault CJ, personal communication, Aug 9, 2018).<sup>7</sup> In the 1930s, he brought the subject even more alive by creating short plays about the history of medicine.<sup>8</sup>

The Sidney Kimmel Medical College at Thomas Jefferson University in Philadelphia, one of the nation’s oldest medical schools and many years older than Tufts, currently has an elective on the humanities for first year students (Voeller M, personal communication, Aug 8, 2018). The large volume by Frederick Wagner (1916-2004), *Tradition and Heritage:*

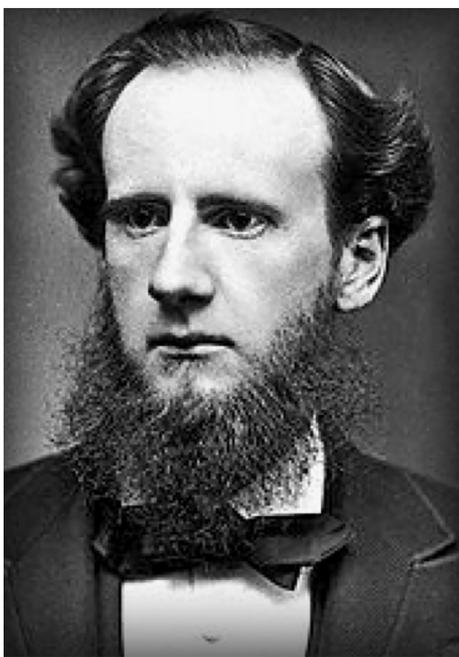


Fig. 1 Louis A. Duhring.

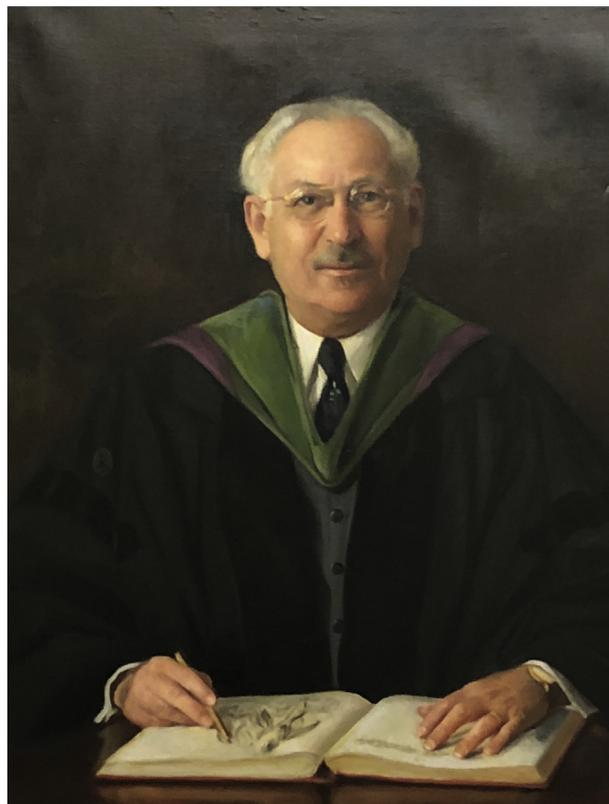


Fig. 2 Benjamin Spector.

*Thomas Jefferson University*, illustrates both the need and usefulness for significant works on the subject.<sup>9</sup>

An innovative way of introducing medical history takes place at the Drexel University College of Medicine in Philadelphia (Peitzman S, personal communication, Aug 10, 2018). The first-year students are invited on a tour of the historic medical sites in Philadelphia, including the marker for Surgeons Hall<sup>10</sup> and the Pennsylvania Hospital, the nation’s oldest hospital, now that the Philadelphia General Hospital is no longer extant.<sup>11</sup>

Recently Edward Halperin at New York Medical College made the plea, asking, “Why do clinicians need to study the history of medicine, and why should this journal\* publish articles about it?”

All physicians are liberal artists. To think, speak and engage in life is to practice the liberal arts every day. As we are all liberal artists, then the only question before us is whether we shall be good or bad liberal artists. I think physicians ought to be good liberal artists. Studying and reading medical history as a component of their professional patrimony is an important part of a physician’s effort to be a good liberal artist.<sup>12</sup>

\* *The American Journal of Medical Sciences* is among the oldest extant medical journals in the United States, having been founded in Philadelphia in 1820 as *The Philadelphia Journal of the Medical and Physical Science*.<sup>13</sup>

## Pioneers in the history of dermatology

Duhring might be considered one of the first, if not the first, to write about the development in the United States. In his presidential address given at the Third Annual Meeting of the American Dermatological Association, the first national dermatology society, held in New York from August 26 to 28, 1879, he recorded the advances of American medicine from the 17th century until the 19th century. This was a time when an increasing number of American medical graduates made the voyage to Europe, returning with books by such pioneers as Robert Willan (1751-1812), P. L. Alphée Cazenave (1795-1877), and Henri Edouard Schedel (1804-1856). It was not uncommon for the frigates to dock in Philadelphia, when immediately a runner would carry the book the several squares to a publisher, such as Matthew Carey (1760-1839), and the printers would work round the clock to set the type and have the American edition available within a week or two.<sup>14</sup> James Clarke White (1833-1916), the first American professor of dermatology, also wrote about the development of the specialty in the United States.<sup>15,16</sup>

### Chicago<sup>17</sup>

In the 1920s and 1930s, B. Barker Beeson (1883-1961) (Figure 3), a Chicago dermatologist, authored a series of biographic sketches for the then *Archives of Dermatology and Syphilography*. During this time, two other Chicago



Fig. 3 B. Barker Beeson.



Fig. 4 William Allen Pusey.

dermatologists developed a penchant for the history of the specialty: William Allen Pusey (1865-1940) (Figure 4) and his trainee and one-time partner Herbert Rattner (1900-1962) (Figure 5), who would serve as an editor of the *Archives of Dermatology*. Pusey had a well-known textbook of the era and published with Rattner *The History of Dermatology* in 1933.<sup>18,19</sup> He remains the only dermatologist to have been elected as president of the American Medical Association.

### New York<sup>20</sup>

The New York area could boast of Paul E. Bechet (1881-1962) (Figure 6), who practiced in New York and Elizabeth,



Fig. 5 Herbert Rattner.



Fig. 6 Paul E. Bechet.

New Jersey. He wrote a number of biographic essays and had exhibits of an historical nature at the annual meetings of the American Academy of Dermatology and Syphilology, as it was then called.<sup>21</sup> Bechet gave a series of historical lectures at the Skin and Cancer Unit in the early 1940s<sup>22</sup> and participated in a symposium on history at the AAD in December 1950.<sup>20,23</sup>

Herman Goodman (1894-1971) (Figure 7), another dermatologist from the area, was exceedingly prolific. His encyclopedic volume on *Notable Contributors to the Knowledge of Dermatology*<sup>24</sup> and *Eponyms of Dermatology*, originally published in the *Archives of Dermatology including Syphilology*,<sup>25,26</sup> are treasures of information.

### Philadelphia<sup>14</sup>

Not to be outdone would be Philadelphia, the birthplace of American dermatology. The impetus behind the development of so many significant works on the subject may well be the Library of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia.<sup>25,27,28</sup> The extensive collection of journals, books, and ephemera are due mostly to the legacy of Duhring, who in 1913 left a large sum of money to the College. At one time, the Library could boast of subscribing to every extant dermatology save two.

The Dermatology Collection provided Reuben Friedman (1892-1956) (Figure 8) with the material for his books on the

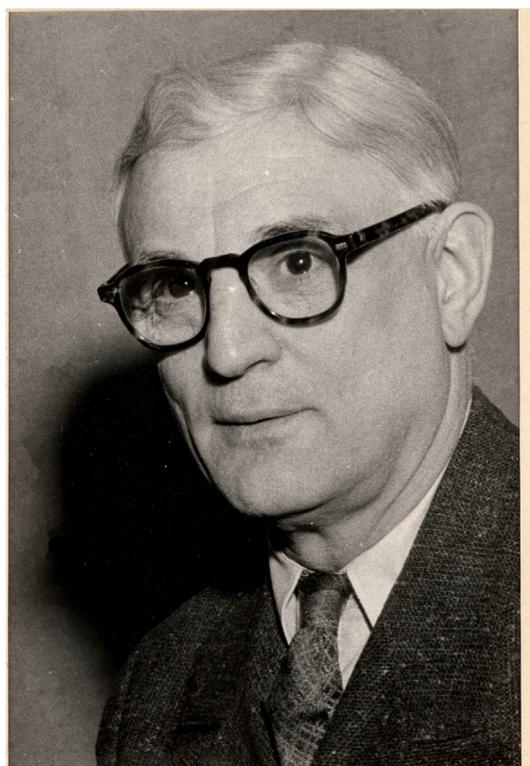
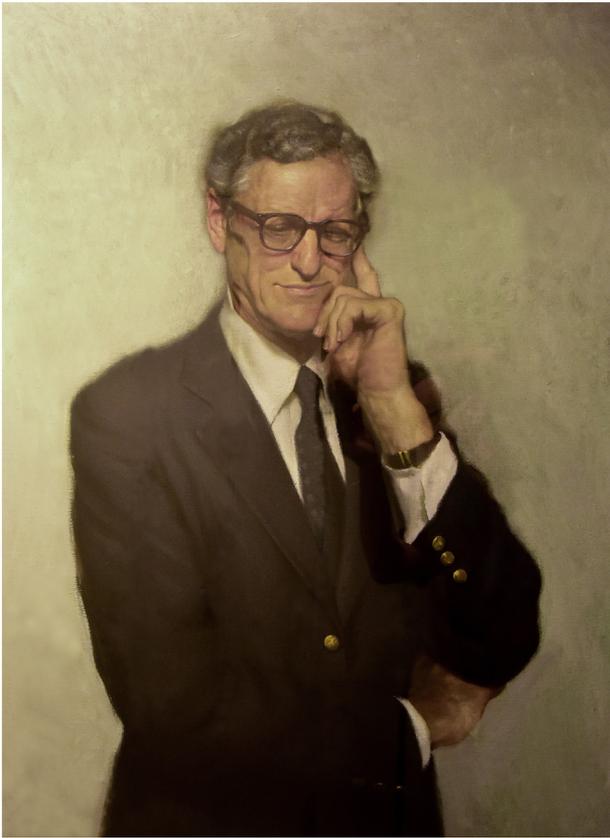


Fig. 7 Herman Goodman.

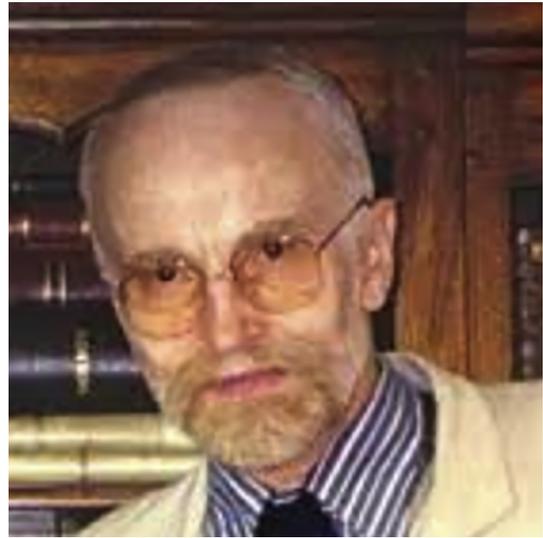


Fig. 8 Reuben Friedman.



**Fig. 9** Walter B. Shelley.

history of scabies and for *A History of Dermatology in Philadelphia*.<sup>14</sup> The latter contains reprints of several papers that relate to Philadelphia dermatology and to American dermatology in general.



**Fig. 11** Karl Holubar.

Walter B. Shelley (1917-2009)<sup>29</sup> (Figure 9) and John Thorne Crissey (1924-2009)<sup>30</sup> (Figure 10) created *Classics in Clinical Dermatology*,<sup>31</sup> which had the unusual achievement of the production of a golden edition to mark the book's 50th anniversary.<sup>32</sup> Without the benefit of the College's Library, this extensive work could never have been accomplished. The same can be said for *The Dermatology and Syphilology of the Nineteenth Century*<sup>33</sup> and *The Historical Atlas of Dermatology and Dermatologists*<sup>34</sup> created by Crissey and myself for the former and with the addition of Karl Holubar (1936-2013) (Figure 11) for the latter.



**Fig. 10** John Thorne Crissey.



**Fig. 12** Leon Goldman.



**Fig. 13** Irwin M. Braverman.

### Teaching of the history of dermatology

Didactic teaching of the discipline has been scant and dependent on a faculty member who might have an interest for history. Leon Goldman (1905-1997) (Figure 12), long-time

chairman at the University of Cincinnati, had a penchant for an historical approach, as well as an appreciation for the use of art to illustrate dermatologic conditions,<sup>35</sup> something that Irwin M. Braverman (Figure 13) at Yale University in New Haven, CT, has used in demonstrating a basic understanding of the skin and its afflictions.<sup>36</sup>

Willard Marmelzat (1919-2012) (Figure 14) from Los Angeles was well-known for developing historical papers of dermatologic interest,<sup>37</sup> and Saul Blau (Figure 15) of New York created a slide series for history lectures at the Skin and Cancer Unit of New York University. In Philadelphia, Herman Beerman (1901-1995) (Figure 16) maintained a life-long interest in the history of the specialty.<sup>38-40</sup> During his tenure as chairman of dermatology at the Graduate School of Medicine of the University of Pennsylvania, he included a course on history in the curriculum. Samuel X. Radbill (1901-1987) (Figure 17), his classmate at Penn and a pediatrician in Philadelphia, gave an annual series of lectures on the subject in Room 96 of the medical school building, and these were subsequently published.<sup>41-44</sup>

A survey taken of the departments in the United States, when the National Program for Dermatology was a thriving part of the American Academy of Dermatology, indicated that of the 93 chairmen who responded to a questionnaire about the history of dermatology, 73 were interested in a syllabus on the subject and 4 were not, whereas 63 could be interested in department presentations on history, 13 were not, and 2 were undecided. There is little reason to believe that a new survey would not give similar results. A questionnaire submitted to the 20 specialty



**Fig. 14** Left to right: Leon Goldman, Lawrence Parish, Margaret Storkan, Gerald Wachs, Willard Marmelzat.



**Fig. 15** Saul Blau.



**Fig. 17** Samuel X. Radbill.

boards then comprising the American Board of Medical Specialties revealed little interest in the history of their disciplines.<sup>45</sup>

### History of dermatology societies

The idea for a group of interested dermatologists to get together came about at the Annual Meeting of the American

Academy of Dermatology (AAD) in December 1972 and where else but the Palmer House. At the time, the AAD was smaller and a much more informal group that often capped off the day's scientific activities with a jazz session in the evening.<sup>46</sup> Five such dermatologists met at the Essex House in



**Fig. 16** Herman Beerman.



**Fig. 18** Marion B. Sulzberger.



Fig. 19 Samuel J. Zakon with his wife, Dorothy.

New York June 1973 to organize the History of Dermatology Club (H of D Club): Gerald Wachs (1937-2013), Saul Blau, Samuel Frank (1909-1989), Leon Goldman, and Margaret Storkan (1919-2000) (Figure 14). Willard Marmelzat and John Crissey were unable to attend. The inaugural meeting would be held the following December at the AAD in Chicago. Marion B. Sulzberger (1895-1983) (Figure 18) gave the first lecture at the Wrigley Building Restaurant.<sup>47-49</sup> Herman Beerman (Figure 16) introduced Sulzberger, and the club was now a reality. Samuel J. Zakon (1898-1978) (Figure 19), who had been the first historian of the American Academy of Dermatology, was not the least bit offended at not being the inaugural speaker and aptly commented, “When the nightingale sings, the birds listen.”



Fig. 20 J. Graham Smith, Jr. (Skee).

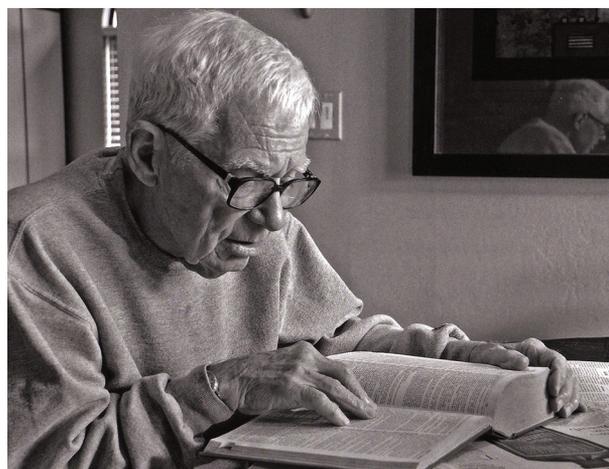


Fig. 21 Charles Steffan.

As the years progressed, the H of D Club became more of a society, and the name was changed to the History of Dermatology Society (HDS) to reflect this. The stimulus for expanding the functions of the HDS came about in 1981, when the National Program for Dermatology was disbanded and when the history seminar was no longer included in the AAD program. The annual luncheon for the NPD had even served as a forum for discussing issue relating to the history of the specialty.<sup>50</sup>

Beginning in 1981, the HDS organized its own seminars that were given on the afternoon of the day before the opening of the annual AAD meeting. In the morning, there would be a tour of a museum or library that would be of historical interest. The annual dinner was later moved to Thursday evening, so that there was now the History of Dermatology Day. The dinner speech became the Samuel J. Zakon given in memory of Zakon. There is also the Samuel J. Zakon Prize for the best paper on the history of dermatology. Annual toasts are given to remember Marion Sulzberger, Herman Beerman, and John Crissey, each of whom had been regular attendees at the annual dinners.

The H of D Society also organizes special lectures, usually at the time of the World Congresses, in conjunction with the French Society for the History of Dermatology (SFHD), organized in 1989 in Paris, and the European Society for the History of Dermatology and Venereology (ESHVDV) founded in Amsterdam in 1999. These are known as the Tri-Society events.

## Publications

Many journals have periodically published contributions of a historical nature. When Arthur Rook (1918-1991) was editor of the *British Journal of Dermatology*, there were several



Fig. 22 Victor Witten.

history of dermatology papers in the issues, just as when John H. Talbott (1901-1989) was editor-in-chief of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*; there were historical editorials, several of which were on famous dermatologists.

J. Graham Smith, Jr. (Skee) (1926-2010) (Figure 20), as the founding editor of *The Journal of the American Academy of Dermatology*, accepted papers of an historical nature and even developed a series about famous dermatologists. The *Archives of Dermatology*, now *JAMA Dermatology*, has used several historical notes for completing a page in their issues. In 2018 Johannes Ring, editor-in-chief of the *Journal of the European Academy of Dermatology and Venereology*, introduced a series about “Pioneers in Dermatology and Venereology.”<sup>51,52</sup>

During my tenures as an editor-in-chief, I had included papers with an historical nature, as *Reminiscences*<sup>†</sup> in the *International Journal of Dermatology*, sections on the history of dermatology in *SKINmed*, and papers of an historical nature, either within the dedicated issue or in various parts of the *Contemporary Dermatology* section of *Clinics in Dermatology*. At one time, *Cutis* had a section, entitled *Biographica Dermatologica*, which I wrote about famous

<sup>†</sup> The idea and name were proposed by John Wehner Jr. (1920-1995), who was the journal publisher at the J. B. Lippincott Company for many years. He oversaw the *International Journal of Dermatology* and was the first publisher of *Clinics in Dermatology*.

dermatologists. Charles Steffan (Figure 21) had similar short presentations in *The American Journal of Dermatopathology* and other historical essays in *SKINmed*.

The encyclopedic *Pantheon of Dermatology: Outstanding Historical Figures* has many biographies of American dermatologists. Christoph Löser, Gerd Plewig, and Walter Burgdorf (1943-2015) sought out the international dermatologic community to create this authoritative source.<sup>53,54</sup>

Another area that was designed to foster the history of dermatology is the *Bibliography of the History of Dermatology*, which has three parts and has been updated every 5 years. Although there are many more computer-driven searches available, the *Bibliography* continues to fulfill an important niche.<sup>55-84</sup>

## Meetings and seminars

Regional, national, and international scientific events often sometimes have included lectures and sessions of an historical nature. Some have even led to definitive studies of the development of the specialty both nationally and internationally.

Illustrative of this concept was seminar on the history of tropical dermatology held at the IV World Congress of the International Society of Tropical Dermatology in Mexico City in 1984.<sup>85</sup> More recently, the Karl Holubar Lecture was given at the 13th World Congress of Cosmetic Dermatology in Dubrovnik, Croatia, where Stella Fatović-Ferenčić included the historical background of mal de Meleda in her lecture, titled “A Journey Through Croatian History of Dermatology and My Connections to Karl Holubar.”

The International Congresses, now known as the World Congresses, have often included history of dermatology presentations and even tours of important history of dermatology sites.<sup>86</sup> Illustrative of this was the visit to l’Hôpital Saint Louis, which took place at the 20th World Congress held in Paris in 2002. This was organized by the dermatologic historians Daniel Wallach and Gerard Tilles.<sup>87</sup> Other publications from these congresses or about them provide a detailed view of the specialty.<sup>88-90</sup>

## Oral history

The pioneer in this field was Victor Witten (1917-2007) (Figure 22), who had practiced with Sulzberger in New York and later at the University of Miami. He interviewed over 200 dermatologists, and these audiotapes and videotapes are the basis of a collection that he donated to the National Library of Medicine. At one time, he recorded a number of the Zakon Lectures.<sup>91</sup>

## The future

The history of medicine—particularly the history of dermatology—appeals to those physicians and people in the allied disciplines who are fascinated by the historical approach. History will remain a subject that is significant but not necessarily the most important part of dermatology. It can flourish by being complementary to the discipline and supplementing presentations on diagnosis, treatment, and prevention. Adding an historical sentence or two to a presentation or a paragraph in a written contribution would enhance each by putting them in perspective.

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