

The Amazing Dr. Trudeau



Photo courtesy of Gloria Duffy

Whenever I discuss family history, as I did with relatives around the 4th of July, I am mindful that my entire branch of our family would not exist without the pioneering work of a physician and medical researcher, Dr. Edward L. Trudeau. Born in 1848, Trudeau nursed his older brother through tuberculosis until his brother died. Motivated to study medicine, Trudeau graduated from Columbia University's College of Physicians and Surgeons at age

22 and set up his practice on Long Island. In 1873 Trudeau was diagnosed with TB and was literally carried up to the Adirondack Mountains to try to recover his health.

Trudeau became interested in early European research on TB, and in 1885 in Saranac Lake, New York, he set up the first TB research laboratory in the United States. There he cultured the TB bacillus and experimented to find a cure. The story of his research is intriguing. For example, the bacterium had to be heated in order to grow, and before electricity it was a challenge to maintain an even temperature.

Dr. Trudeau's 1925 autobiography tells how he constructed his laboratory, invented a thermostat, procured water, maintained heat using a wood fire in a stove, experimented on animals captured in the local woods, stained cultures and conducted observations with his microscope. It is an amazing portrait of dedicated scientific research with very primitive tools. In 1894, after his lab burned down, with support from friends and donors, a more modern laboratory was built for Dr. Trudeau.

Trudeau's discoveries from his own experience with the disease and his scientific observations included that TB was not inherited; the communicable nature of TB; that it flourished in warm environments; that it was curable in its early stages; and that cool weather and fresh air, isolation from other patients, and a strengthening diet were beneficial to patients. He observed that confining TB patients in hospitals with heated wards, bad air, restricted food and other patients nearby was exactly the wrong thing to do, leading the bacillus to breed and be recommunicated from patient to patient, and patients to become debilitated.

To implement his own conclusions, Dr. Trudeau founded the Adirondack Cottage Sanitarium in Saranac Lake, with "cure cot-

tages" where patients were separated from one another and had porches where they could sit, lie or even sleep outside in specially designed chairs while breathing the fresh cool mountain air. Those strong enough were encouraged to walk or hike; organic local and healthful food was served; and music, art, crafts and other pursuits were arranged to engage the patients in nurturing activity. A staff of doctors mentored by Trudeau participated in his research and treated the patients at the Sanitarium.

Many notable people came to the Cottage Sanitarium for the "fresh air cure," including entertainer Al Jolson and writers Robert Louis Stevenson and Walker Percy. Quite a few of those who came returned to a productive life.

In her twenties, my grandmother, Tennys Redinger, worked as an assistant to New York financier James Cox Brady. (If this name is familiar, his grandson, Nicholas Brady, was the U.S. Treasury Secretary during the Reagan and George Bush, Sr. administrations.) My grandmother contracted tuberculosis, and around 1912, the generous Mr.

Brady sent her to the Adirondack Cottage Sanitarium to recover. My grandmother was cured, and went on to move to Los Angeles and Puerto Rico, where she helped her brother manage the family fruit-growing business, to marry, to have a daughter and grandchildren, and to travel the world, living another 60 years and passing away at the age of 87. She remembered sleeping outside on her cure cottage porch at the Sanitarium, and all her life maintained the healthy diet and lifestyle she learned at Saranac Lake.

Dr. Edward Trudeau passed away in 1915, finally a victim of the tuberculosis he had staved off for over 40 years. He had treated over 15,000 patients and saved many lives. He laid the groundwork for much that came after in treating the disease. And if his name is familiar, cartoonist and Doonesbury creator Garry Trudeau is his great grandson.

The Sanitarium closed in 1954, after antibiotics became available to treat TB. Dr. Trudeau's laboratory closed in 1964, but it was succeeded by the Trudeau Institute, which continues to do research on the immune system. The Trudeau tuberculosis laboratory is preserved intact as a museum in Saranac Lake, by an organization called Historic Saranac Lake, and it is worth a visit either in person or virtually at historicsaranaclake.org.

A new biography of Dr. Trudeau, *A Rare Romance in Medicine*, will be published next year on the 100th anniversary of his death, with a foreword by Garry Trudeau. Quite aside from his breakthroughs in understanding and treating one of the devastating diseases of his time, there is much to learn from Dr. Trudeau, about how to maintain health and wellness, that remains important today. 🐾

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