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# Surgical Leader

# *John Blair Deaver, M.D., and His Marvelous Retractor*

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**J**OHN BLAIR DEAVER was born near Buck, Pennsylvania, in Lancaster County on July 25, 1855, to Dr. Joshua Montgomery Deaver and Elizabeth Clair Moore. The elder Deaver was a reputable country physician, educated at the University of Maryland, who fathered three physicians and a college president. John Blair Deaver (Fig. 1) went to boarding school at West Nottingham Academy in Maryland. After boarding school he taught in Lancaster County country schools to raise funds to attend the nation's first medical school, the University of Pennsylvania. On receiving his M.D. degree in 1878, Dr. Deaver completed 1-year internships at both Germantown Hospital and Philadelphia Children's Hospital, after which he embarked into clinical practice. Alongside his brother, Dr. Harry Clay Deaver, he made home visits to patients to perform surgeries as well as managed a busy 16th Street and Vine Street Philadelphia office.<sup>1, 2</sup>

After gaining a reputation in the Philadelphia region in clinical practice, Dr. Deaver joined the faculty of his Alma Mater, practicing from 1881 to 1899. Despite his lectures being highly popular, Dr. Deaver later left the University of Pennsylvania in 1899 as a result of a bitter rivalry with fellow surgeon, J. William White, after Dr. White was given charge of surgical education.<sup>2</sup> However, Dr. Deaver accumulated surgical accolades and gained most of his recognition at German Hospital, now Lankenau Hospital in the suburbs of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.<sup>1</sup> He joined the faculty in 1886 and was appointed to Chief of the Surgical Department in 1896.<sup>2</sup> Dr. Deaver operated at German Hospital for over 40 years and his "Saturday Clinics" were attended by surgeons from all over the world. During these demonstrative sessions, Dr. Deaver would perform up to 25 operations in a single Saturday afternoon while his colleagues observed. With regard to his vast surgical acumen, it was reportedly said that Dr. Deaver performed more surgery in Philadelphia than any surgeon

before and that no one would ever accumulate the same surgical volume in the future.<sup>1</sup>

On the resignation of rival Dr. White as a result of illness, Dr. Deaver returned to the University of Pennsylvania in 1911. He was first appointed as Professor of the Practice of Surgery (1911 to 1918), later rising to the John Rhea Barton Professor of Surgery (1918 to 1922), and later Emeritus Professor of Surgery (1922 to 1931)<sup>2</sup> (Fig. 2). A prolific writer, Dr. Deaver published over 248 articles in journals and authored many books, predominantly on abdominal surgical conditions and management, including such topics as colorectal, breast, and prostate cancer and surgical management of appendicitis.<sup>1, 2</sup> Furthermore, as a leader in American surgery, Dr. Deaver was a founding member and the fifth President of the American College of Surgeons (1921 to 1922).

Dr. John Blair Deaver is perhaps remembered most for his approach during appendectomy, which involves a vertical incision in the right lower quadrant and subsequent medial retraction of the rectus muscle.<sup>2</sup> With regard to retraction, his instrument has been used by countless medical students and residents to assist with exposure of intra-abdominal viscera and pathology. It is unknown when the Deaver Retractor was first developed; however, it was first depicted in an article in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* in 1928 describing papillary cyst carcinoma of the ovary.<sup>2</sup> Dr. Deaver insisted that all operations be performed by his own hands and thus indefatigable team members grasped his retractor for great lengths of time.<sup>1, 2</sup> He was said to have favorite phrases, including "cut well, get well, stay well," and as an advocate of early surgery for appendicitis "an inch and a half, a minute and a half, a week and a half" regarding length of incision, operative time, and hospital stay for the procedure. To the surgical ideals voiced by Lord Moynihan, "the heart of a lion, the eye of an eagle, and the hand of a woman," Dr. Deaver immediately added "the constitution of a mule."<sup>1</sup> His sayings remain contemporary examples of the spirit of Dr. Deaver.

A cursory thought of Dr. Deaver may associate him with a tiring arm; however, a more thorough history

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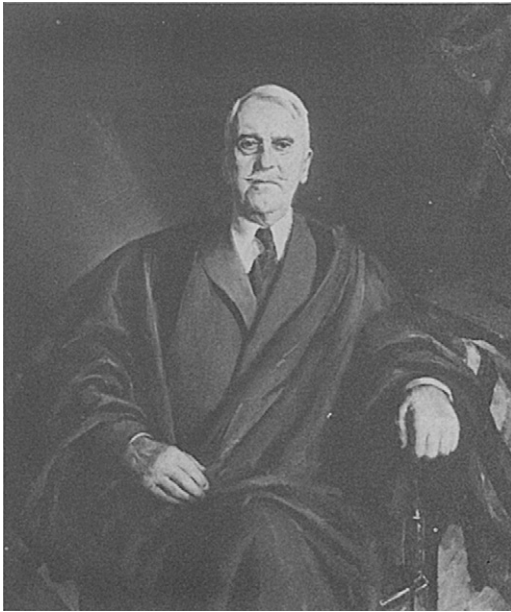


FIG. 1. Corman ML. John B. Deaver. *Dis Colon Rectum* 1987;30:66-71.

reveals a surgeon's surgeon with a work ethic and industriousness that made him the busiest of his time in Philadelphia. He married Caroline Randall and had four children, one of whom, J. Montgomery Deaver, M.D., interned under his father at Lankenau Hospital and joined him in practice shortly thereafter.<sup>2</sup> Deaver died September 25, 1931, at the age of 76 years under consultation of the regarded radiologist Henry Pancoast. It



FIG. 2. ULCA 60-7-4 b1 f5 Operating Room Sr Else Dodenhoff Dr JB Deaver Dr Mckinney Sr Emma Tobias. ELCA Archives Image. Posting on web. *Flickr from Yahoo!* 2011. February 4, 2011.

is believed that Dr. Deaver succumbed to a malignancy of unknown source, as Dr. Pancoast destroyed the radiologic films as Dr. Deaver had made him previously promise.

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