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NICHOLAS P. CHRISTY, MD

Interview conducted by  
Adolph Friedman, MD  
March 20, 2002

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## **FAMILY BACKGROUND AND EARLY EDUCATION**

**Friedman:** You were born in Morristown, New Jersey, June 18, 1923. Tell me about your parents. Where were they born? What type of education they had, if any? Did they have any trades or professions?

**Christy:** My dad was an engineer, but he never really practiced that craft. His life long affection was the outdoors, and so he went into surveying; then he got involved in lumber and became an East Coast and New York representative of Western lumber mills. My mother was two years younger than he; she was WHO's representative on the West Coast around Seattle, and there it was my mother found a man, and they were married shortly before World War I.

**Friedman:** Do you have any siblings?

**Christy:** I had one sister, who died in 1990 at age seventy-seven.

**Friedman:** Did she have a medical interest?

**Christy:** No--well, I am not quite sure. She almost became the fulltime head of the volunteer department the first day of high school in New York--a job that I wish she had accepted, but her husband had some feelings about his wife working. He was an old-fashion kind of man. Something about the idea of her working put him off so much that he urged her not to do it, and so she didn't, and that is because she would have been so good at it, I think.

## **TRAINING AT YALE UNIVERSITY AND COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY COLLEGE OF PHYSICIANS AND SURGEONS OVERLAPS WITH HIS SERVICE IN THE UNITED STATES NAVY**

**Friedman:** I observe that you went to Yale undergraduate school, then to P&S [Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons]. Your naval research service sort of overlapped. Now please explain it to me--you were in the Navy from 1942 to 1946, but then it took you five years to graduate from medical school.

**Christy:** I had to go back to Yale in 1946-1947.

**Friedman:** How much time did you spend in the South Pacific?

**Christy:** Two years.

**Friedman:** And when did you finally get married to your first wife?

**Christy:** We were married June 21, 1947.

**Friedman:** Did you have any children?

**Christy:** Yes, a boy that's now forty-six, and a daughter, say thirty-six.

**Friedman:** Did they get involved in medicine?

**Christy:** No, not in any way.

**COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY COLLEGE OF PHYSICIANS AND SURGEONS  
Internship and residency in internal medicine; fellowship with Joseph W. Jailer;  
faculty member at Presbyterian Hospital**

**Friedman:** Tell me about your hospital services at the College of Physicians and Surgeons.

**Christy:** Let me think of that for a second. Nineteen fifty one to nineteen fifty-two was an internship in internal medicine; 1952-1954 assistant resident, also in internal medicine; 1954-1956 I was a fellow in the laboratory of Joseph W. Jailer and became a member of the Endocrine Society at the end of 1956; 1959 to 1966, I joined the P&S faculty at the Presbyterian Hospital, and I was there as a junior faculty member in medicine, leaving in 1969, I guess.

**Friedman:** Where was the Vanderbilt Clinic? In New York?

**Christy:** It was all part of the Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center.

**MARKLE SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM**

**Friedman:** I was impressed that you were a Markle scholar. That was quite an honor.

**Christy:** The purpose of the Markle Scholarship, which began in 1950, was to persuade doctors--in any specialty--who seemed to be pointed towards careers in academic medicine but might not have been able to take the time for the necessary training because of a lack of external, outside support.

**Friedman:** The years you have in your CV are 1956 to 1961?

**Christy:** It came in five-year packages.

**INSTRUCTOR AT COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY MEDICAL SCHOOL;  
DIRECTOR OF MEDICINE AT ROOSEVELT HOSPITAL; PROFESSOR OF  
MEDICINE**

**Friedman:** I know that you gradually worked your way up the ladder at Columbia, from instructor in medicine to director of the Department of Medicine at Roosevelt Hospital. You were the director of medicine in 1965, and you became fulltime professor of medicine in 1971?

**Christy:** Right.

**EARLY RETIREMENT FROM COLUMBIA**

**Friedman:** When you retired at Columbia in 1979, you were fifty-six years old. What made you retire at that time?

**Christy:** I don't--where do you see that?

**Friedman:** Well, that was when you went to SUNY in Brooklyn as professor of medicine for another nine years.

**Christy:** Well, that was 1965.

**Friedman:** You retired in 1979 from Columbia.

**Christy:** Only from Columbia, though.

## **PROFESSOR OF MEDICINE AT BROOKLYN VA HOSPITAL**

**Friedman:** You were only fifty-six years old.

**Christy:** Well, retire isn't the right word. I left the Columbia post in 1965 and moved to the Brooklyn VA hospital.

**Friedman:** What year was that?

**Christy:** That was 1979 . It was 1979 to what--1988? Then I was sixty-five--so switched back to Columbia. You see? That shouldn't be left as a retirement.

## **A falling out with the Board of Trustees of Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center**

**Friedman:** Why leave Columbia at such a young age?

**Christy:** I had a falling out with the board of trustees.

**Friedman:** That's a common reason.

**Christy:** Just because of the medical support for medical programs in the City of New York--got to be too expensive for the City to bear, which meant that the help that I was supposed to be getting had to be curtailed.

I had friends in high places, [namely], the president of the Downstate Medical Center; his establishment was in Brooklyn [and] the overall head was Plimpton. [Plimpton] offered me a job--just out of the blue. If I had known better--the magnitude of the administrative portion of it, what it was going to amount to--I would not have taken it because in the end it proved to be a very burdensome and administrative job, and the atmosphere was not maybe what I was looking for--all management.

## **RETURN TO COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY MEDICAL SCHOOL**

### **Teaching clinicians how to write proposals**

**Friedman:** When did you figure that out?

**Christy:** Nineteen eighty-eight, which is beneficial. The reason I left was because a friend of mine conceived a way to recreate a task for me back at Columbia Medical School--recreated it out of his imagination. [I] spent the rest of my official career back in Columbia teaching fellows, residents, and members of the house staff, chiefly, how to write proposals. That was 1988 to 1993, when I did, in fact, retire.

**Friedman:** Incidentally, who is BM Christy?

**Christy:** My wife [Beverly].

**Friedman:** Okay, that means you wrote two papers in conjunction? I'm just curious.

**Christy:** Yes.

### **EARLY RESEARCH**

**Friedman:** As far as your research is concerned, you started out your work with gonadectomized mice with adrenocortical abnormalities?

**Christy:** Correct.

### **A CAREER RESEARCHING THE ADRENAL CORTEX**

**Friedman:** Then you worked your way into adrenocortical research, which is more or less what you did for the rest of your life. Was this Joe Jailer's influence?

**Christy:** My formal training with him was 1954 to 1956. I remained on good terms with him.

**Friedman:** He died?

**Christy:** Yes. He died very young; he was forty-six. Lovely man--he deserved better.

**Friedman:** I had one brief opportunity to meet him, back in about 1949. I was in New York trying to find my way around endocrinologically, and I went up to visit Dr. Soffer, and he was out of town. Dr. Jailer was just leaving to go to Mount Sinai. He spent the afternoon with me because Soffer wasn't there; he was very kind, and that's the only time I ever met him.

**Christy:** Endlessly kind man.

## **WRITING SKILLS; INTEREST IN PITUITARY ACROMEGALY**

**Friedman:** In the sixties, you seem to be contemporarily interested in pituitary acromegaly, at least more interested than you were formally. Was this just spreading out your interest academically, or did something take you off the track from the adrenals?

**Christy:** Well, in a way it did. I had some ability as a writer, so I got invitations to write--in the nature of chapters, textbooks, and things like that.

## **ADVANCING HIS CAREER THROUGH THE WRITING OF TEXTBOOK ARTICLES**

**Friedman:** I noticed that throughout the bibliography.

**Christy:** Yes. So there were two or three reasons--not all of them bad--for why I made the decision to write those articles in great depth. It's also very good medical politics because some of those textbooks have a very wide distribution, so your name does indeed get effectively spread around the endocrine community. That was the intent to promote, I guess you would say, with ambition; I enjoyed doing this. Some of them were well regarded; so I kept doing it.

**Friedman:** There are also scientists who need to keep their name in the limelight for grants and things of that nature.

**Christy:** Exactly.

## **CUSHING'S SYNDROME AS A PEDAGOGICAL TOOL**

**Friedman:** You continued your work on Cushing's for many, many years.

**Christy:** It's a medical kind of disease, but one could learn a great deal from it. Many people in the endocrine field made a scientific career, you might say, out of Cushing's syndrome, includingly myself. What made it possible was that I maintained contact with patients with these diseases--back then named Cushing's--an uncommon disease. It was a chance to indulge one's clinical interest and teach the house staff, as it were, with "your

left hand” as you teach them how to do an orderly approach to a difficult clinical problem.

**Friedman:** I noticed inadvertently throughout the bibliography [that] there must have been about a half dozen articles with snake bites and viper bites.

**Christy:** Yes.

**Friedman:** How did you get involved in that?

**Christy:** That became quite a consuming side line; I don't think I can explain it to you because I don't know myself.

### **HONORS AND AWARDS**

**Friedman:** I'd like now to discuss the various honors and awards that you have deserved in your life. I realize the Markle Scholarship was income provided. Now, where was the National Humanities Center for Research?

**Christy:** That was a sabbatical, which was put together in a Research Triangle partnership of North Carolina--which includes Chapel Hill and the University of North Carolina--with six months of writing your own stuff and participating in scholarly life; I produced several papers, which I never actually would do if I didn't have a big piece of free time.

**Friedman:** What was the award of the Royal Society of Medicine?

**Christy:** That was not an award; it was a membership to the advisory board of a British society of internal medicine specialists.

**Friedman:** And then you have two awards for medical writing and medical communication. One is the Swanberg Award and the American Medical Writer's Association. What was the Swanberg Award?

**Christy:** I don't remember.

**ENDOCRINE SOCIETY SERVICE**

**Friedman:** You were secretary-treasurer of the Endocrine Society from 1978 to 1989.

Why were you doing that? Did you enjoy the work? Were there any people you particularly enjoyed working with? Tell me a little bit about that part of your life.

**Christy:** Well, it was. The person who persuaded me over the phone was named Grant Liddle. He once was the president of the Endocrine Society. I hesitated a little bit; it was an administrative job. I had once been the editor of *JCEM* from 1963 until 1967; that was a pretty consuming job for five years.

**Friedman:** For three years, you were on the editorial board.

**Christy:** It was a big administrative job that was also challenging.

**Friedman:** Was there anybody in particular that you enjoyed working with--whose company you enjoyed ?

**Christy:** I don't remember. It was great working with Ms. [Nettie] Karpin; she was steady, very good humored, persuasive, and--on the whole--a capable woman and fun to work with.

**Friedman:** You were involved in other journals?

**Christy:** No, that's the first 1963 to 1967 period--working as the secretary-treasurer of the Endocrine Society.

**Friedman:** Well, I'll change the subject again because it's a personally interesting matter. How did you become friends with Sam Leonard? He was in Ithaca and you were in the New York City area.

**Christy:** How did you find out I was?

**Friedman:** In my records there was correspondence between the two of you, which Sam sent me.

**Christy:** Is he still there?

**Friedman:** He is, but he is in his nineties and he's blind and we can't correspond. Therefore, he also can't read, so I try not to write to him anymore, but I talk to him on the phone, rarely.

**Christy:** Could I get a copy of that?

**Friedman:** Was there anything else that you think I should know about your connection to the Endocrine Society or about yourself?

**Christy:** I think my principal contribution to medicine was through the channel of the Director of Department of Medicine at Roosevelt in New York City between 1965 and 1979.

**Friedman:** I appreciate you giving me all this time. And I am sorry I hassled you so much, but you were fabulous.

**Christy:** Oh, no.

End of Interview

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