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JOHN B. STANBURY, MD

Interview conducted by  
Adolph Friedman, MD  
September 19, 2000

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## EDUCATION

**Dr. Friedman:** Dr. Stanbury, you understand the purpose of this interview, so do I have your full permission?

**Dr Stanbury:** Yes.

**Dr. Friedman:** You were born May 15, 1915, in North Carolina. When you were growing up, what kind of school did you go to?

**Dr. Stanbury:** I went to the local public schools in Raleigh and later in Durham.

**Dr. Friedman:** Prior to going to Duke, did you do well in anything in the lower schools? Were you a ballplayer, interested in science? Were you an orator, interested in anything of that nature?

**Dr. Stanbury:** No. I was particularly interested in chemistry and spent a lot of extra curricular time in chemistry.

## MEDICAL TRAINING

**Dr. Friedman:** Then you got into college at Duke. Were you already psychologically geared to go to medical school, or did this come later?

**Dr. Stanbury:** That came a little later in my college career. It didn't come when I first went to college. As a matter fact, my intention was to try Harvard Medical School, and if I didn't get in, I was going to go to biology.

## HARVARD UNIVERSITY AND MASSACHUSETTS GENERAL HOSPITAL

**Dr. Friedman:** So you got in. From Harvard, you went right to Mass General, is that correct?

**Dr. Stanbury:** Well, there was an interim period of about nine months when I was waiting for my appointment at Mass General to start. I worked in an infectious disease hospital for several months, then in a hospital for rheumatic fever for several months.

**Dr. Friedman:** Once you got into medical school, there was nothing unusual--you just went through in a routine manner like everybody else?

**Dr. Stanbury:** That's right.

**Dr. Friedman:** When you went to Mass General, were you struck by any of the unusually renowned people who [possibly] became a mentor [to you], or anything [else along those lines]?

**Mentor: J. Howard Means**  
**Residency**

**Dr. Stanbury:** Not before the war particularly, but after the war, yes. In particular, I was mentored by Howard Means when I was a resident after I came back from the Navy in 1946.

**Dr. Friedman:** Once you became a resident--and a year later became the graduate assistant--did you then get into thyroid work?

**Dr. Stanbury:** No, I had a year as resident at the Mass General; then, I spent a year in pharmacology at the medical school with Dr. [Otto] Krayer. Then I came back as the chief resident at the Medical Center at MGH.

**Taking over responsibility of the Thyroid Unit**

**Dr. Friedman:** In that year, were you involved with Means anymore?

**Dr. Stanbury:** Oh, yes. When I came back as chief resident--I was, of course, his chief resident. He was ill part of that year, so I had perhaps some additional responsibilities, which were not generally necessary for the chief resident, because he was out. After that, he came to me in the summer of 1948 and asked me if I would take over the responsibility for the Thyroid Unit. Meanwhile, I spent a lot of time trailing along behind Fuller Albright, but then I had this position beginning January 1, 1949, with the responsibility for the Thyroid Unit. [Rulon] Rawson had just left, and I took his place.

**Dr. Friedman:** That was January first?

**Dr. Stanbury:** Nineteen forty-nine.

**LEAVING MASSACHUSETTS GENERAL HOSPITAL FOR MIT**

**Dr. Friedman:** That was the year I was with Astwood, and I used to come over on Wednesday morning to attend the thyroid conference to learn more about it. Then you remained at Mass General for quite a few years, correct?

**Dr. Stanbury:** Yes, I left in 1966 and went to MIT.

**Studying iodine deficiency; expedition to Argentina**

**Dr. Friedman:** During that period, you wrote quite a few articles on the thyroid. If there was any one thing you've done that you particularly enjoyed, or you felt you contributed any significance to, i.e., introduction to medicine or found any new scientific things, would you mind telling me about it?

**Dr. Stanbury:** Well, perhaps two channels. One was the channel that led into the study of iodine deficiency and its ramifications. This began with a visit from a western Argentinean physician, and, as the result of that visit, we mounted an expedition to western Argentina to study the impact of iodine deficiency on the population. We published a monograph as the result of that titled, *Endemic Goiter: The Adaptation of Man to Iodine Deficiency*, which was published by the Harvard University Press in 1954. That interest is continued until the present time. I'm still working along those lines because there have been many ramifications, complications, problems, possibilities for studies.

### **Inborn errors of metabolism**

The other line of investigation that continued for a long time began with the study of a young patient--sixteen years of age in 1949--who had a very large goiter. It was not a matter of iodine deficiency at all, but was an inborn error of metabolism in the thyroid. Following that over the next decade or two, I made additional studies of other subjects with inborn errors of the thyroid. Those have all been published and are in [the] bibliography.

**Dr. Friedman:** We will come back to that later, but is that what precipitated you to write your book?

**Dr. Stanbury:** Which book are you referring to?

**Dr. Friedman:** *Inborn Errors of the Metabolism*.

**Dr. Stanbury:** Oh yes. I don't know how much of this you're interested in. However, after the lecture I gave on the thyroid at the College of P&S in New York, Saturday at noon, I took the train back to Boston and wondered during that time whether a monograph on the *Inborn Errors of Metabolism* might be of some interest--more generally than just on the thyroid. In thinking about that after returning to Boston, it became evident that it would be too big a problem for one person to tackle; so I got Wyngaarden and Fredrickson to join me in that enterprise. That book grew rapidly and went through five editions under my involvement and has since gone through a couple of additional editions, and now I think there are three volumes on *Metabolic Basis for Inherited Disease*.

**Dr. Friedman:** Do you by chance have a spare copy of your first edition?

**Dr. Stanbury:** I don't know; I'd have to look. There's a lot of stuff on the third floor.

**Dr. Friedman:** Well, if you have a chance to look, and you could contribute that to the Endocrine Society, we would be most grateful.

**Dr. Stanbury:** There may be; I probably do have an extra copy of that.

**Dr. Friedman:** The first edition.

**Dr. Stanbury:** Yes!

### **THE ENDOCRINE SOCIETY**

**Dr. Friedman:** Now, looking through here, you do not list membership in the Endocrine Society, which I thought you were.

**Dr. Stanbury:** Thought I were, or was?

**Dr. Friedman:** I thought you were a member.

**Dr. Stanbury:** Yes.

**Dr. Friedman:** But you didn't think that was important enough to list--error of omission?

**Dr. Stanbury:** Error of omission, yes, pure error.

### **EARLY DAYS AT MIT**

#### **Professor of Experimental Events; Department of Nutrition and Food Science**

**Dr. Friedman:** Once you went to MIT, what was your experience there? What were you doing there; what was your title?

**Dr. Stanbury:** My title was "Professor of Experimental Events"; I think the first person with that title at MIT. It was in a department that was titled the "Department of Nutrition and Food Science," but it had a broader base than that. While there, I just continued along the same lines I had been working on at the General.

#### **Reason for leaving Massachusetts General Hospital**

**Dr. Friedman:** If I remember correctly, you left the General because there was some dissatisfaction or disagreement as to who should follow the next professorship of medicine, is that correct?

**Dr. Stanbury:** No. There was, of course, interest in who was going to be the next Jackson Professor at the MGH. Alex Leaf was given that job. I left the MGH at that time because I didn't see a better playing field for myself at the MGH, and the playing field was wide open at MIT.

**Dr. Friedman:** Is there any more you can tell me or discuss with me about your years at MIT? The people who you worked with--actually, you were the headman there, so there wasn't anybody for you to look up to, like at Mass General. You were the boss.

**Dr. Stanbury:** I wouldn't put it quite that way. I was in the department, the head of which was Dr. Nevan Scrimshaw; and he was chairman of the department. I was answerable to him, of course, but really had quite a "free hand" to do as I pleased.

**Dr. Friedman:** How many medical students did they have at MIT in those days?

**Dr. Stanbury:** They didn't have any medical students. They had pre-medical students, but there were no medical students at that time at MIT.

**Dr. Friedman:** Then what was Scrimshaw's actual function?

**Dr. Stanbury:** He ran the department. It was quite a large Department of Nutrition and Food Science. He was a physician, primarily interested in nutrition, and still is. He's still active.

### **Harvard University-Massachusetts Institute of Technology Program: instruction and promotion of basic science and medical science**

**Dr. Friedman:** Please tell me something about this Harvard-MIT Program in Health Sciences.

**Dr. Stanbury:** That came along probably in the early 1970s. The chief of that was Irving London. It was a program designed for Harvard medical students who were interested in basic sciences and had a background in basic sciences, and who were hopefully going to become medical scientists in their careers, and that, I think, has proved to be the case. In the third year of course, they came over to the Harvard campus and the Harvard hospitals, just as other medical students.

### **DISCUSSION OF EARLY DAYS AT MASSACHUSETTS GENERAL HOSPITAL Fuller Albright**

**Dr. Friedman:** During your work at Mass General, who were the people besides Means that you think are worth telling me about?

**Dr. Stanbury:** The most important person--including Means--in terms of medical science at Mass General was Fuller Albright. Other distinguished people on the staff there were Paul White, Chester Jones, and Walter Bauer. Albright was the main endocrinologist.

**Dr. Friedman:** Albright was the main endocrinologist.

**Dr. Stanbury:** Oh, yes.

**Dr. Friedman:** Would you tell me a little bit about your contact with him?

**Dr. Stanbury:** During my chief residency at the General, Albright had weekly rounds, which were quite interesting--because of Albright. He was a very dominant person in the best sense. People gathered around him; he didn't gather around other people. He was an enormously resourceful fellow. He was very humble--no conceit whatever--but a remarkably penetrating mind, who looked at patients that he saw with a remarkable penetration, always looking at them from a "new" point of view. He was remarkable in his innovative skills in understanding what was going on with the patient and designing the appropriate studies that would illuminate their problem. Of course, he was principally interested in bone and also interested in reproductive function from the endocrine point of view. He wasn't particularly interested in the thyroid, but I would say that he was more interested than anything else in metabolic bone disease.

**Dr. Friedman:** I have a book that he and Reifenstein wrote on parathyroid disease.

**Dr. Stanbury:** Well, Albright would have been the "brains" behind that. I forgot to mention Joe Hall, who was a very important figure in senior positions at the time when I was a resident.

**Dr. Friedman:** What was Ralph Goldsmith at that time?

**Dr. Stanbury:** Ralph Goldsmith?

**Dr. Friedman:** E.R. Goldsmith.

**Dr. Stanbury:** Oh, Richard Goldsmith. He was a research fellow and clinical fellow in the Thyroid Unit. He was from Cincinnati, went back to Cincinnati, and did some research there--had an endocrine practice and died several years ago.

**Dr. Friedman:** I remember he died prematurely, didn't he?

**Dr. Stanbury:** Yes. I think he had a carcinoma of the liver.

#### **COAUTHORING *THE METABOLIC BASIS OF INHERITED DISEASE* WITH JIM WYNGAARDEN AND DONALD FREDRICKSON**

**Dr. Friedman:** Now, Wyngaarden's function and position at MIT. As well as being your coauthor--

**Dr. Stanbury:** Wyngaarden was never at MIT.

**Dr. Friedman:** Oh.

**Dr. Stanbury:** When I thought I was interested in doing this book, the first person who seized on it was Jim Wyngaarden--because he was a senior resident at the MGH at that time. Obviously, a brilliant fellow with a lot of biochemical training, and it was a very happy choice. We worked together with Don Fredrickson on subsequent editions, and he

became professor at Duke then became chief of the NIH. Then he worked with the National Academy of Medicine.

**Dr. Friedman:** Did he go to the NIH with Fredrickson?

**Dr. Stanbury:** No. He went to the NIH as a fellow. Whether Fredrickson was there as a fellow at the same time, I don't recall. Both of them became directors at NIH. First Fredrickson; then Wyngaarden.

**Dr. Friedman:** I think to the general medical public Fredrickson had more recognition at NIH.

**Dr. Stanbury:** That's possible, but I think they were both very successful men--and in the group at the NIH.

### **THE PATHFINDER FUND**

#### **A continuing interest in world population problems; United States Agency for International Development**

**Dr. Friedman:** What is the Pathfinder Fund? I've come across that in something else I'm doing.

**Dr. Stanbury:** There was a time I was very interested in the world population problems, and still am. It's a major problem. I don't know quite how it happened, but I was asked to be a member of the board of the Pathfinder Fund. I was a member of that board for a couple of years. The Pathfinder Fund was established by a man named [Clarence] Gamble, who was a member of the Gamble family of Proctor and Gamble, who never practiced but was a graduate of Harvard Medical School. Gamble used to promote family planning as sort of a personal interest. When he died, the Gamble family set up the Pathfinder Fund, which was a fund primarily with Gamble money, but subsequently heavily funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID); and I was asked to be a member of their board. I worked with them a long time. They had a major reorganization at the time I was executive director of the Pathfinder Fund. Then there was a problem with a member of the Gamble family who was working with the Pathfinder Fund, and it became incompatible for us to work together, so I left.

**Dr. Friedman:** I'm going to meet with Janet McArthur this afternoon, and she also was active in the Pathfinder Fund.

**Dr. Stanbury:** I didn't know that. Really.

**Dr. Friedman:** I have it in my notes.

**Dr. Stanbury:** I'm sure that was before I was related to the Pathfinder Fund. The most important figure in the Pathfinder Fund was Jack Schneider who had been the dean at the Harvard School of Public Health.

## **HONORS**

### **An honorary degree from the University of Leiden on the occasion of the 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its founding**

**Dr. Friedman:** You didn't make such a "to-do" about your special honors, but these foreign invitations you had to the Netherlands, Ecuador, and so forth, would you tell me a little about them. Did you enjoy them? Did you learn anything by it? Do you think you stimulated people in any of these countries to go into the field of iodine deficiency?

**Dr. Stanbury:** The episode at the University of Leiden was celebrating their 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary of their founding. The director of endocrinology from that institution had come to our laboratories at Rockefeller as a fellow in 1949. The chief of endocrinology there was Professor Querido. He came as a Rockefeller fellow to work in our laboratory in 1949-1950 at Mass General and, subsequently, invited me to be a participant and to receive the honorary degree at Leiden in 1975. It was a remarkable occasion. It was a brilliant occasion celebrating four hundred and fifty years of their existence. The Queen [Juliana] was there--a dozen of us, who were given honorary citations at that time. And shortly after the ceremony, which was held in the Pieterskerk where the Pilgrims spent some time before they came to this country--was held there in that huge church. The Queen was there, and immediately afterwards there was a tea or party celebration. And there a dozen of us--as I mentioned--and the Queen went down the line of us and spent about two minutes with each one of us--with no notes, called us by name--and discussed our interests. It was the most remarkable exhibition of what I suppose Queens do.

### **An honorary degree from the University of Pisa on the occasion of the 650<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its founding**

**Dr. Friedman:** She had to have a clinical mentality to be able to do it.

**Dr. Stanbury:** She trained herself, I suppose. As to the Pisa affair, the person who did the promoting--someone always has to promote these things--was Aldo Pinchera.

**Dr. Friedman:** Oh yes, I know him well.

**Dr. Stanbury:** He is chief of endocrinology at the University of Pisa. He set this up, and that was again a rather brilliant occasion celebrating the 650<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the University of Pisa, which is one of the oldest universities in the world. Not quite as old as Oxford, but almost.

**Dr. Friedman:** That was the one in 1997.

**Dr. Stanbury:** Yes.

**Dr. Friedman:** You were given an honorary degree there, also.

**Dr. Stanbury:** That's right.

**Dr. Friedman:** Was that a Doctor of Science or something at that point?

**Dr. Stanbury:** I think they call it Doctor of \_\_\_\_\_. I can't spell that for you, but it amounts to an honorary MD.

### **Honorary degree for studying iodine deficiency in Ecuador**

**Dr. Friedman:** How about the ones in Ecuador and Bangkok?

**Dr. Stanbury:** I worked in Ecuador on problems of deficiency beginning in 1961, and I think this was just in recognition of those activities. I went down every six months to a year--just to see if the projects were going well--and they were under the direction of Fierro.

### **Honorary degree for studying iodine deficiency in Bangkok**

**Dr. Friedman:** How about the situation in Bangkok?

**Dr. Stanbury:** Bangkok was another extraordinary occasion. It was a presentation of a medal and of an award and a lot of other stuff. I can show you around the house, here. It was an award set up in honor of a member of the royal family, Prince Mahidol. Prince Mahidol had come to the Harvard Medical School, and he graduated here in 1928. The family set up this award about five years ago in his honor. So every year, they give this award to two people, and it was given to me this time. Again, it was a rather brilliant occasion. The King was not in good health at that time, so the presentation was actually by his daughter.

### **Fahrney Medal of the Franklin Institute**

**Dr. Friedman:** The last one you have here is the Fahrney Medal of the Franklin Institute.

**Dr. Stanbury:** Yes. That's a medal that's given two or three each year at the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia.

## **CONCERNS REGARDING THE SIZE AND GROWTH OF THE ENDOCRINE SOCIETY**

**Dr. Friedman:** I'm familiar with it because I'm from Philadelphia.

**Dr. Stanbury:** I have to say that my connections with the Endocrine Society were somewhat dampened because my primary interest became the thyroid. I found the Endocrine meetings to be increasingly complex--all different sessions going on--conflicted to which one you went to. It became too big. And they've become enormous now, so I hadn't gone for a number of years. It's a society that, I suppose, serves a useful

function, but after a year--people complaining about its size and its lack of personal--that's the same thing that's happening to the Thyroid Society, too. It's gotten so large that its kind of hard to know which sessions to attend--and has become less and less a personal club. It's no longer a personal club as it used to be.

### **FAMILY, CHILDREN, AND GRANDCHILDREN**

**Dr. Friedman:** I remember that. But as far as the Endocrine Society is concerned, they are now trying to at least give proper attention and time to the clinicians. At least if one is interested in clinical medicine and research, the Endocrine Society is trying to encourage participation by clinicians. They are dividing up the time more than giving--as you said--concurrent sessions to the clinically oriented, so the clinician of endocrinology has more opportunity to present and to learn it. Among the things I neglected to ask you is about your family. Do you have children?

**Dr. Stanbury:** We have five children, or had five children. We lost one last year.

**Dr. Friedman:** Sorry.

**Dr. Stanbury:** As I mentioned, my wife is down helping in Alabama, taking care of the most recent arrived grandchild. A young man now three or four days old, and we now have nine grandchildren.

**Dr. Friedman:** What field of interest did your children have?

**Dr. Stanbury:** The first one is an architect planner, works \_\_\_\_\_. My second lives in Washington Crossing just across the river from Trenton. She works in Trenton. She's an epidemiologist with the Department of Health for the State of New Jersey. The third lives here in Boston and works at the college of Holy Cross where she is a professor of Adeva literature. She's good at it--just returned from a sabbatical in Cambridge in England where she and her husband both were on sabbatical. He's a biochemist. The fourth was Pamela, whom we lost last year. She had two children and a husband surviving. The fifth is where my wife is now--in Auburn, Alabama, where my fifth son is professor of chemistry.

**Dr. Friedman:** So none of them went into medicine?

**Dr. Stanbury:** No, none went into medicine.

**Dr. Friedman:** Did your wife have any profession before she got busy caring for grandchildren?

**Dr. Stanbury:** No profession that she pursued. She's a painter and a musician, but not a professional.

**Dr. Friedman:** Is there anything you think I should know about you, your work, and your interests, that I didn't ask you?

**Dr. Stanbury:** Oh, I can't think of anything of any significance. No. I keep "plowing along," spending what time I can on the tennis court and our summer place in Maine where we do a lot of tennis, music, gardening, walking, eating, sleeping.

**Dr. Friedman:** Well, at least you're in good enough condition to play tennis. That's significant. That's something.

**Dr. Stanbury:** Well, it's fun.

**Dr. Friedman:** Well, I want to thank you very much for your time, and I'm sorry that we had the problem with the postal service.

**Dr. Stanbury:** Well, they've done me in. They really did. They made a mess of things.

**Dr. Friedman:** I'm going to make up for what I didn't have by going over your bibliography more carefully and looking at some of the articles when I get back in the next couple of weeks. Because the first thing I have to do is have this transcribed--of which I will send you a copy for your approval.

**Dr. Stanbury:** Okay. There's one book that I forgot to mention that may be of interest to you. I published a book a few years ago. It's a history of the Thyroid Unit at Mass General.

**Dr. Friedman:** I think I wrote to you about *The Constant Ferment* [*The Constant Ferment: A History of the Thyroid Clinic and Laboratory at the Massachusetts General Hospital, 1913-1990*]. Maybe you're bogged down in your summer mail.

**Dr. Stanbury:** Well, something did come in the summer mail, and it's still in my desk for execution--upstairs--and I will get a copy of that and send it along. I don't have a spare copy. I have to go back to the publisher and get another copy.

**Dr. Friedman:** If you can get it, well and good. If you have to buy it, then I will buy it.

**Dr. Stanbury:** It's only about fifteen dollars, but I think it gives a good picture of what the Thyroid Unit was like between its beginnings in 1975, or so.

**Dr. Friedman:** What I would appreciate is that if you are going to go to the publisher, contact them and ask them to send me the copy and bill me. I gave you my card, I think, from the Endocrine Society; bill it to us rather than you being kind enough to do everything else. So you don't have to pay for it.

**Dr. Stanbury:** Okay.

**Dr. Friedman:** I just want to remind you--that you will look for the possibility of a second copy of your first edition. We would be most grateful to have that in our library.

**Dr. Stanbury:** I'm pretty sure that I have an extra copy of that. I'm almost sure I do.

**Dr. Friedman:** If you come across anything else up there, we'd be most grateful to have it.

**Dr. Stanbury:** Okay.

**Dr. Friedman:** Our history is sort of two-pronged; primarily, the Endocrine Society; secondarily, endocrinology. And I assume that--if I live long enough to complete this job-- sooner or later it will be written up by a "ghost writer."

End of Interview

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