



A tribute to Penn G. Skillern, MD

O. PETER SCHUMACHER, MD, PHD; CHAIRMAN, DEPARTMENT OF ENDOCRINOLOGY

THIS issue of the *Cleveland Clinic Journal of Medicine* presents the first of a two-part series of articles by the colleagues of Penn G. Skillern, MD, who retired recently after 35 years with the Cleveland Clinic, having served as Chairman of the Department of Endocrinology and Director of Continuing Medical Education. This is our way of saying thanks to a superb physician, teacher, and friend.

A graduate of Indiana University, Penn Skillern embodies the qualities of a true Hoosier. His openness, forthrightness, and directness were manifest in all his conduct as a department member, Chairman, and colleague. You always knew exactly where you stood with him.

He let his patients know where they stood, too—and they loved it. He gave them clear answers and definite advice. (That was problematic only when I saw one of his patients, who would expect the same kind of unequivocal counsel from me!) Yet his decisiveness arose not from rigidity, but from compassion for the patient's viewpoint, and an unswerving determination to solve a problem by whatever means made sense, according to his Hoosier practicality and analytical mind. He would never duck a problem or a difficult patient. He had incredible insight in getting to the heart of a complex situation. He would make a problem manageable by simplifying the way he looked at it, and then proceed with resolve.

In his constant search for solutions, Dr. Skillern became a pioneer in the use of treatments now widely adopted. When a new treatment came along that appeared to be a better solution than traditional practice, rather than continue to ruminate, he would go ahead with it. For example, having observed the prevalence of depression not amenable to psychiatric treatment, when the now widely used antidepressant agents were developed, he saw a potential solution to a problem, and courageously used them to help patients.



He forged ahead not only in using, but in developing new modalities. He was among the first to use radioactive iodine treatment for hyperthyroidism, and, along with Dr. George Crile, Jr., developed the definitive use of thyroid needle biopsy as opposed to multiple other tests in thyroid nodule pathology. The latter is a reflection of the fact that he has always been concerned about cost-effectiveness in relation to results; he was one of the first physicians to practice cost-effective medicine. His devotion to continually improving patient care in terms of both results and cost has been instrumental in placing the Cleveland Clinic in the forefront in avoiding surgery for thyroid enlargement.

The endocrinology trainees at times were puzzled by his way of simplifying complicated patient care issues, yet they rendered the "sincerest form of flattery," imitation. He was an excellent teacher, with a strong organizational ability. While director of the internal medicine residency training program, he recognized the value—and the fairness—of recruiting qualified osteopathic physicians—a number of whom were chief residents and are now on staff. It was through his efforts that our medical education building was conceived, our post-graduate medical education grew into a full-fledged program, and our patient education program was developed.

He published 47 papers that added significantly to the literature on various aspects of endocrinology. It was Penn Skillern, along with Dr. Crile, who coined the term "sugar-eating tumor," which is still used in reference to the as yet unexplained phenomenon in which patients with large tumors develop severe hypoglycemia, similar to that seen in pancreatic tumors.

Dr. Skillern's career speaks of a champion of the patient, the referring physician, the group practice, and the physician in training.