

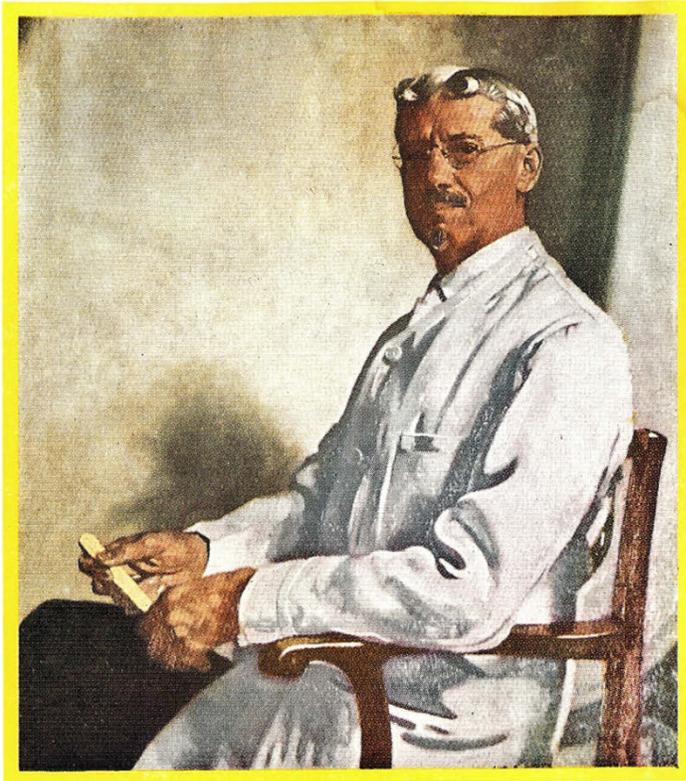
JOSEPH B. DELEE (1859-1942)

Obituary published in the YEARBOOK of Obstetrics and Gynecology by his disciple J.P. Greenhill

On April 2, 1942, Dr. Joseph B. DeLee, recognized by many as the world's foremost obstetrician and teacher of obstetrics, died at the age of 72, after having devoted 50 years of his life to his specialty. Dr. DeLee was born in Cold Springs, New York, October 28, 1869, one of 11 children of Morris and Dora Tobias DeLee. He was graduated from the Chicago Medical College (now the Northwestern University Medical School) in 1891, then interned at the Cook County Hospital and thereafter spent two years abroad in postgraduate work. On his return to Chicago in 1894, he was given an appointment in the Department of Obstetrics at Northwestern University. When Professor Jaggard died suddenly in 1896, Dr. DeLee was appointed chairman of the Department of Obstetrics. He was only 27 years old, and he held the position until 1929 when he became chairman of the Department of Obstetrics at the University of Chicago.

On February 14, 1895, Dr. DeLee established the Chicago Lying-in Dispensary in a \$12 a month four-room tenement basement to provide good obstetric care in the home for poor women and to instruct medical students and nurses in the care of maternity patients. There were many trials and tribulations during the early years of the Lying-in Dispensary owing to lack of funds and to the suspicion of poor obstetric patients who could not understand why any physician would want to give them excellent care for nothing. The free service grew rapidly. In 1899, Dr. DeLee converted a residence into a 14 bed maternity hospital, thus enabling him to teach doctors and nurses both in the home and in a hospital. In 1903, the well known Maxwell Street Dispensary, now the Chicago Maternity Center, was opened. Ten years later the Chicago Lying-in Hospital was erected on 51st Street. The first of the two buildings was known as the Mothers' Aid Pavilion and was donated by a group of women organized by Dr. DeLee's sister. This was the first hospital in the country devoted exclusively to the care of patients with puerperal fever. The final structural monument on the campus of the University of Chicago was opened for patients in May, 1931. Here Dr. DeLee remained until the time of his death, although he relinquished most of his duties in 1933. He became emeritus professor in 1935. This hospital is now called the Joseph Bolivar DeLee Lying-in Hospital.

Dr. DeLee wrote *The Principles and Practice of Obstetrics* in 1913. During the next 25 years he prepared six more editions of this monumental work which became the physician's obstetric bible. He also wrote an outstanding book on obstetrics for nurses. From 1903 to 1917 he was editor of the YEAR BOOK OF OBSTETRICS and from 1918 to 1941, editor of the department of "Obstetrics" of the YEAR BOOK OF OBSTETRICS AND GYNECOLOGY. He wrote numerous articles and was a popular speaker before innumerable medical societies. Many honors came to him, including the Rosenberger Medal of the University of Chicago "For Greater Service to Humanity" and the Distinguished Service Award of the Mississippi Valley Medical Society. He was president of the Chicago Gynecological Society, chairman of the Section of Obstetrics and Gynecology of the American Medical Association and vice-president of the American Gynecological Society.



JOSEPH BOLIVAR DE LEE

From a portrait by Sir William Orpen owned by Dr. Sol Theron DeLee

What kind of person was Dr. Joseph B. DeLee? He was truly a great man, one who stands with such men as Leonardo Da Vinci, Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Edison and Sydenham, for he possessed in a high degree some of the attributes of each of them. Dr. DeLee was a *humanitarian*. His life was characterized by a continuous effort to help others, regardless of the cost to himself in health, comfort or money. His aim always was to improve the art and practice of obstetrics so that few women might die or become maimed during childbirth; so that children could be born without blemish and with as low a death rate as possible. The race, religion, color or financial status of patients meant absolutely nothing to him. He was considerate of everyone regardless of station in life. He devoted time to anyone who needed his skill, as thousands of poor women in Chicago can testify. On many occasions when there was little food in a destitute home Dr. DeLee left money for provisions. He frequently paid for special nurses to care for charity patients who needed extra attention. More than one medical student is indebted to Dr. DeLee for financial assistance to complete his course at medical school. As far as I know, Dr. DeLee practically never refused to make a contribution in response to any of the vast number of requests that ere made to him in person or by mail. He gave nearly \$300,000 to the institutions he founded and to Northwestern University.

Dr. DeLee was a *perfectionist*. Nothing ever satisfied him unless it was as nearly perfect as it was possible to make it. He was tireless in his effort to improve the technic of deliveries in the home as well as in the hospital, to perfect old and new instruments, to see that every

illustration for his textbook was without flaw and that every motion picture or model made for teaching purposes was without blemish. He insisted not only on cleanliness but also on beauty and perfect efficiency. Time and money meant little when appearance and usefulness were involved. Dr. DeLee was immaculate. He always wore a spotlessly white collar, white tie and white shirt, his tiny beard was always neatly trimmed and his hair always carefully brushed. His eyes sparkled usually, especially when discussing some interesting case. He was tall and erect and had a long, sprightly step which fitted perfectly with his rapid gestures and exceptionally alert mind.

Dr. DeLee was a true *scientist*. Some may dispute this because he performed little laboratory research. Nevertheless he was one of the greatest of scientists. Like any laboratory scientist, he sought the truth and found it in numerous ways. His contributions to the practice of obstetrics are many. Perhaps the chief was his successful effort to elevate the plane of obstetric practice. This he accomplished by showing physicians how to reduce the maternal and fetal mortality and morbidity and by teaching women to demand proper obstetric care. No one did more to prove the importance of proper asepsis and antisepsis in obstetrics. He never wavered from the stand that the best way to prevent and treat puerperal infection is to isolate all infected women in a separate physical structure. He showed how forceps deliveries should be carried out and improved the technic of the cervical cesarean section. He was a staunch advocate of the use of local infiltration anesthesia because it is the safest of all anesthetics. He proclaimed the value of a properly-timed episiotomy and introduced the "prophylactic forceps" operation. For the latter he was severely criticized at first, but many of those who censured him for "radicalism" later became converts to this operation. Dr. DeLee devised or improved numerous instruments and aids to obstetrics, among them the head stethoscope (with Dr. Hillis), the obstetric forceps, uterine packer, cervix volsella, a clock with bell attachment, suction apparatus, incubator, sterilizer, instrument case and other devices. Likewise, he prepared a series of motion pictures for teaching obstetrics unexcelled in photography and manner of instruction. Dr. DeLee was a *skilful technician*. It was thrilling to observe his manner of delivering babies. Nature endowed him with unusually long fingers which he made agile by various exercises. Nevertheless, the gentleness and deftness of his hands were often amazing and proved what a great artist the man was. His natural manual dexterity and craftsmanship were manifested by the installation of doorbells to help pay his way through medical school, the invention of 40 surgical instruments and apparatus, the preparation of beautiful models in plastics and other materials, the "tinkering" with apparatus which went wrong in the hospital and the practical suggestions he made for improvements in the construction of each new hospital building. Dr. DeLee was a *teacher*. Fortunate were those who came under his tutelage because he was unsurpassed in this field. He utilized every known method of pedagogy, but chiefly precept. What he spoke he actually carried out, and there were always a large number of observers to watch "The Chief." Dr. DeLee never for a moment forgot that he was a teacher, and that is why interns, medical students and nurses always gathered about him in the delivery room, in the corridors, in the clinics and in his room. It did not matter whether he was delivering a patient or was sitting in his room to relax or walking through the halls, he kept up a constant discourse on interesting cases and procedures, articles in the literature or other subjects. He taught thousands of medical students, interns, postgraduate students and nurses the proper care of obstetric patients. In the early years he spent as much as 10-14 consecutive hours demonstrating the progress and conduct of labor. To assist in teaching,

he prepared models, drawings, charts and other aids. His famous and unsurpassable series of motion pictures was also prepared for the purpose of teaching obstetrics.

Dr. DeLee was an outstanding *writer*. Mention need only be made of his world-famous textbook for students and practitioners, of which he prepared seven editions, his book for nurses, of which there were 12 editions, and the YEAR BOOK OF OBSTETRICS AND GYNECOLOGY, of which he was an editor for 39 years. Whatever Dr. DeLee wrote was unequivocally accepted as authoritative. His style of writing was unique and well known to his readers. All who read the YEAR BOOKS are familiar with his lucid, instructive, crisp, stimulating and witty comments and criticisms. He praised, condemned, questioned and ridiculed statements made by others, but he was always honest in his remarks and always tried to be fair in his criticisms. His discussions on the obstetric literature in the YEAR BOOKS will remain as classics.

Dr. DeLee was an *idealist*. His ideal was to improve obstetrics, and for this single purpose he made real sacrifices. His whole life was wrapped up in his work. He spent practically all of each day at the hospital, even after he had retired from active practice. From 1920 on, his private office was in the hospital, so that even his office work was carried out at the hospital. He was everywhere in the hospital, particularly when someone was in trouble. It was uncanny how he always appeared when one of the younger staff obstetricians or an outside physician was in difficulty during a delivery or an operation. Dr. DeLee was always on the alert to maintain a high standard of work. This was not easy, but he never faltered or compromised. He never failed to read aloud the Latin maxims on the plaques in every delivery room of the Chicago Lying-in Hospital, namely, *Non vi sed arte* (Not with force but with art) and *Primum non nocere* (First do no harm). Because of his ideal, Dr. DeLee had few outside interests and few intimate friends. He never married because, as he said, "I have no time for my work *and* a wife."

Dr. DeLee was *humble*. He rarely spoke of himself or his results. When referring to the hospital, it never entered his head to say "my hospital," which in reality it was. He used the term "The Chicago Lying-in Hospital" or "The Hospital." He always gave credit to others, particularly to his younger associates. He frequently quoted his mother and told of how much he owed to her. He helped many individuals financially, but no one ever heard Dr. DeLee speak of this. Despite the numerous dinners and parties given in his honor, Dr. DeLee never overcame his shyness and embarrassment at ovations he received. Those who knew "The Professor" intimately had rare good fortune, because such geniuses appear infrequently. In the death of Dr. DeLee, medicine and obstetrics in particular lost one of the greatest leaders of all time. Of Dr. DeLee it may truly be said, "Know ye that a Prince and a great man has fallen this day . . ." (II Sam. 3: 38).

-J. P. GREENHILL.