

A Chester County House Call – The Doctor Is In

By Erica Reilly, Westtown Township Historical Commission

Before the days of specialized medical practices and urgent care centers, the majority of doctors in Chester County made house calls. Then as now, these family doctors possessed a remarkable range of understanding in all areas of medicine, from childbirth to mental health conditions. They gained most of their knowledge from hands on experience, often relying on their own skills and gut instinct to treat a host of ailments before today's advancements in diagnostic testing.

Dr. Robert Poole III, a 90-year-old retired doctor, was never sure what to expect when he entered the homes of some of his patients. "There was a whole range of health issues we were asked to help with," he says. "Sometimes they were physical, but there were other cases where people needed guidance for emotional and social problems. If someone needed specialized care, we sent them into Philadelphia."

Medical specialists came into prominence in the 1950s, but the majority practiced in cities and hadn't yet reached the suburbs. At that time, Philadelphia was likely the only city in the world with six medical schools: The University of Pennsylvania, Jefferson Medical College, Female Medical College of Pennsylvania (renamed the Medical College of Pennsylvania in 1970), Hahneman Medical College, Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine, and Temple Medical School. These fine schools helped bring a wave of innovation to the communities they served as they began expanding health care knowledge through research.

A well-known doctor with an established practice in West Chester between 1955 and 1994, Dr. Poole was even asked to get involved with family and community relationships. "I saw everything," he says with a laugh, "from extramarital affairs to secrets I carry with me today."

Dr. Poole graduated from Jefferson Medical College in 1953. "Family doctors were disappearing," he says. "I admired my own childhood family doctor, who could take care of anybody and everybody. As a result, I went into family practice because of my curiosity relating to human behavior."

Over the course of his career and before specialization, he delivered several hundred babies in the West Chester area. "There's something about going into the home and seeing generations of families growing together that you don't see anywhere else," he says. "The relationships and trust you share with your patients are immeasurable and rewarding."

As healthcare improved and patients began to live longer, nursing homes began to appear. Medical doctors were often asked to treat patients in these health institutions, and Dr. Poole served as the attending doctor for the James C. Smith Memorial Home at Oakbourne Mansion and Park.



Dr. Robert Poole

In 1896, the Smith family had willed the mansion to the Philadelphia Protestant Episcopal City Mission for sick and convalescent women. The Smith Memorial Home hosted patients for more than 70 years before closing in 1971 due to operational costs. The township acquired the mansion from the state in 1974.

"I worked at the home for 15 years," said Dr. Poole. "There were usually 20 to 25 women living there at a time, but sometimes as many as 30. It was one of the first mansions to be used as a nursing home."

The home hosted many events and enjoyed a lively social scene. The women, who were mandated to be 23 years or older and white, enjoyed nicer grounds and living conditions than many homes for patients or senior citizens. Dr. Poole visited the patients once a week to tend to their needs, which often included treatment for heart disease and stroke.

A director with nursing experience oversaw the home as the CEO and supervised a small number of staff. A groundskeeper and his wife lived at the gatehouse on S. Concord Road.

Dr. Poole also worked at the State Hospital of Chester County in Embreeville, where he treated psychiatric patients for their physical problems. Doctors were expected to treat a host of mental conditions such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorders, and paranoia.

The healthcare system was much different in those days. "We didn't always have the tools or training for certain conditions, so we did our best," he says. He saw new drugs such as thiorazine being introduced to reduce hallucinations and calm patients. Some of these treatments are still being used, while others have been discontinued. Today, many of these mental health institutions, including the Embreeville State Hospital, have been closed because of remarkable improvements in the care of mental illness.

Despite advances in medicine, a loss of peace of mind now seems to disrupt the pursuit of happiness. "My patients seem to be living longer but enjoying it less," says Dr. Poole. He has seen an increase in anxiety and depression over the course of his practice, as well as other problems with obesity and addiction. A widower with four daughters, five grandchildren and two great-grandchildren, Dr. Poole has written extensively on the problems facing this generation. In fact, one of his books is *My Uncle Sam Needs a House Call: The Faltering Health of a Nation*.

Maybe it's time we started having those house calls again.

OCTOBER

7th

SAVE THE DATE

Westtown Day

Westtown Day will be held on Sunday, October 7, 2018 from 11 a.m. to 3 pm. at Oakbourne Park, 1014 S. Concord Road.

This community day is free and open to the public. The historic Oakbourne Mansion and grounds will feature live music, carnival games, pony rides, petting zoo, food trucks, Civil War reenactors, historic demonstrations, and an assortment of local businesses, vendors, and organizations. There's something for everyone. For more information visit www.westtownday.com.

If you would like to volunteer for this event, please contact Pam Coleman at pcoleman@westtown.org. If you are interested in sponsoring Westtown Day, please contact Historical Commissioner Erica Reilly (ericamreilly@gmail.com). Sponsors will be listed in the event program and on the Township website.