

## The History of The New England Roentgen Ray Society

The New England Roentgen Ray Society (NERRS) was founded just before the first World War in response to the nascent body of knowledge and technological developments in diagnostic and therapeutic radiology. With the discovery of the x-ray in 1895, the world of medical diagnosis began to change dramatically. The NERRS began as the Massachusetts Radiological Society and its inaugural meeting was held on May 6, 1914 by a group of "nineteen medical men interested in roentgenology assembled in response to a call by Dr. Ariel George at the Harvard Club in Boston, Massachusetts." Although nothing formal was done for the remainder of World War I, on December 19, 1919, at the instigation of Dr. George W. Holmes-for whom the Annual Holmes Lectureship is named-a Constitution and By-laws were adopted stating that the primary purpose of The New England Roentgen Ray Society "shall be the study and advancement of the science of Roentgenology." Monthly meetings were initiated and have been held virtually on-schedule ever since. For many years the meetings were held at the Boston Medical Library, but have since moved to the Longwood Towers in the 1970s and then to the Radisson Hotel (formerly Howard Johnson's Motor Lodge) in Cambridge in the 1980s. At its first anniversary the Society had 51 members, predominately from the Boston area. But as early as 1920, physicians from other New England states began to join, including Dr. Charles Aldrich from as far away as Brattleboro, Vermont. By 1930 the membership had grown to nearly 130 and included two women, and today, our Society boasts a membership of over six hundred.

The minutes of the monthly scientific meetings from the early decades have been conscientiously maintained-all of the fourteen volumes are available in the rare book collection at the Countway Medical Library in Boston-and are an impressive testimony to how well the original purpose of the Society was met. In the 1920s, the meetings consisted of a formal lecture followed by a lively discussion. At least annually, a meeting would be held with other specialty societies or with another radiological society. The program from the combined meeting of the NERRS and the New York and Philadelphia Roentgen Societies at the Hotel Somerset in Boston on the weekend of January 29, 1926 is a good example of the kinds of topics at the forefront of discussion at that time. Much time at that meeting was devoted to radiation therapy and in attendance were Drs. Holmes and Merrill Sosman, among other well-known pioneers in radiology, as well as J.V. Meigs from surgery, Harvey Cushing from neurosurgery, and E.A. Codman from pathology. In fact, early in the 1920s the tradition of inviting notable guest lecturers from outside the New England area was begun. For example, the May 1929 meeting included Dr. Pancoast from the University of Pennsylvania who spoke on the technique of pneumoencephalography. Descriptions of those early scientific sessions make for interesting reading: "June 7, 1920. Dr. Merrill described the technique of gastrointestinal examination used at the MGH and showed many interesting plates of stomach lesions, but called particular attention to the large six and twenty-four residue [sic] (which), even in anesthetic cases must not be considered obstructive. Dr. Holmes showed a series of chest plates of one hundred boys between the ages of eight and sixteen attending a private school who have had the best attention as to living conditions, food, etc., that money could give, and asked for a discussion on the appearance of these chests." Consider this remarkable discussion about the radiographic appearance of colon carcinoma that is relevant even today: "October 17, 1930. Cancer occurs in the colon in two main forms: an ulcerating mass in the lumen of the bowel and as an annular type with progressive narrowing of the lumen by a constriction process. These annular types represent about 25% of colonic carcinomas. Diverticulitis is usually over a large area while carcinoma is limited. One must never lose sight of the possibility of carcinoma accompanying diverticulitis in another part of the colon or even engrafted on a diverticulitis."

In the late 1930s, resident instruction was added to the monthly meeting and in 1941, the film-reading session was inaugurated by Merrill Sosman. In 1944, the George W. Holmes Lecture was instituted and to this day, remains the highest honor the Society grants.

Despite its emphasis on the science of radiology in the early years, the Society was not immune from political issues concerning medicine in general and radiology in particular. As early as 1921, the minutes recorded a discussion of the plan of the War Risk Insurance Board to award contracts to "so-called x-ray laboratories" to offer radiography to World War I veterans: "It is the consensus of opinion of this Society that some action be taken to protect ex-servicemen from the risks attending x-ray examinations by incompetent men." Much of the early political struggles centered on the gradual realization that Radiology should be a separate medical specialty. For example, efforts to offer a hospital insurance plan for Boston subscribers in the mid-1930s (at an annual premium of ten dollars!) which would include radiology services but not those of other physicians were vigorously opposed by the Society. As Radiology successfully developed into a formal and distinct specialty in the 1930s with its own board certification,

the NERRS became very active in defining the relationships between radiologists and hospitals, actively supporting efforts to insure that radiology departments "seek the services of a competent radiologist to supervise the work closely."

In more recent years the Society has become much less politically active, at least in a formal way. However, the intent of the original charter, "the study and advancement of the science of Roentgenology", has been adhered to faithfully. Scientific sessions still occur monthly during the academic year and are well-attended by residents, fellows, and practicing radiologists in New England. Lecture topics continue to reflect the most current advances in diagnostic imaging and interventional radiology. The ever-popular "Panel of Unknown Cases", a descendent of the film-reading session, continues to be an important pedagogic fixture of the monthly scientific meeting. Beginning in the 1990s, the annual scientific program expanded to include day-long refresher courses, at first on a variety of topics but more recently on updates in Ultrasound, Breast Imaging, and Cardiac Imaging. Every year since 1944, the Society has had the privilege to award 63 luminary radiologists with its highest honor, the George W. Holmes Lectureship. In 2005, the Society inaugurated a rotating, named lectureship series which recognizes the outstanding contributions of educators from academic radiology departments in New England. As current members, we look back with gratitude to those whose interest in learning and teaching has made the New England Roentgen Ray Society such a vibrant part of the New England radiological community for the past 88 years.

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