



# Editorial



## *A Well-Deserved Tribute*

If we need to be reminded of how young the laboratory science of nutrition really is, we should note that in April, 1956 a testimonial dinner was held in Washington, D. C., in honor of Dr. Robert R. Williams, who on his seventieth birthday stepped aside as chairman of the Williams-Waterman Fund for Combat of Dietary Diseases. For it was Dr. Williams who after many years of investigation and experimentation was able chemically to identify and synthesize thiamine—only twenty years ago!<sup>1</sup>

What is perhaps most unique about this discovery is that Dr. Williams patented the steps in the synthesis of thiamine and turned the profits over to two organizations established to encourage further research (the Williams-Waterman Fund and Research Corporation). As Dr. Sebrell, who has succeeded Dr. Williams, says in this issue (pp. 582-84), more than six million dollars has been realized, all of which has generously and unselfishly gone into the war against human malnutrition.

Even more striking has been the recognition by Dr. Williams and his associates that achieving a laboratory triumph is hardly enough—the ultimate goal is the practical utilization of the discovery. Hence, he has devoted his untiring energy to bringing thiamine (which has dropped from about eight dollars to six cents a gram) to the millions in Asia and elsewhere who are sick and dying from the lack of it.

### **Presentation of Testimonial Letters to Dr. Robert R. Williams at Testimonial Dinner, Mayflower Hotel, Washington, D. C., April 23, 1956**

Mr. Chairman, Dr. and Mrs. Williams, Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is my very signal honor and, I must add, indeed my pleasure, to have been designated to present to you, Bob, this book of letters, written to you by about a hundred of your friends and

His work on grain (rice) enrichment is internationally known and his objectives can be stated as follows:

“Practical experience in trying to change dietary habits shows that unless cereal enrichment is made universal with respect to major staples, either by industry action or by government action, it may as well be abandoned. Any lesser action will have no more value than the simpler process of telling the people to take pills or to choose their food with scientific skill.”<sup>2</sup>

That beriberi is still a major nutritional problem in many areas of the world is readily documented.<sup>3</sup> That it is slowly but surely disappearing from the earth is due in no small measure to a vigorous chemist who did not stop after synthesizing thiamine.

Two addresses, by Drs. Jolliffe and Sebrell, will be found in this issue. They indicate the significance of the man, his work, and, even more, the youthfulness of scientific clinical nutrition.

—S. O. WAIFE, M.D.

#### REFERENCES

1. WILLIAMS, R. R., and CLINE, J. K.: Synthesis of vitamin B<sub>1</sub>. *J. Am. Chem. Soc.* 58: 1504, 1936.
2. WILLIAMS, R. R.: Food fortification in the Orient. *Nutr. Rev.* 12: 289, 1954.
3. WILLIAMS, R. R.: The world beriberi problem today. *J. CLIN. NUTRITION* 1: 513, 1953.

colleagues. These letters express sentiments of endearment, admiration, and respect that many, if not most, people find themselves too shy or embarrassed to say to you face to face; they can, however, express their true feelings in a letter or on public occasions such as this,

These letters, Bob, are mostly from persons from this country, but they are also from friends in Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines. Also, Bob, a very large proportion are from people who address you familiarly as R. R.—or Robert—or, more frequently as just plain Bob.

All of these letters contain expressions of respect and admiration for you as a man; as a trusted and honored friend; as a great scientist whose synthesis of thiamine can bring naught but good to the human race; and as a wise administrator of the funds accruing from the proceeds of your invention. All of these sentiments are repeated over and over again in these letters—and they must be common knowledge by now to all of us here.

But these letters say more than that. So that all of us here can share with you some of these expressions, I shall read excerpts from some of them.

One of your admirers says: "You share with such men as Pasteur, Dale, Fleming, and Waksman the glory of advancing knowledge in fields which can never bring anything but blessings to the human race."

Another says: "Your achievement has meant health and life to many millions who, otherwise, would have been sickly and died young. Hundreds of millions yet will benefit, thanks not only to your initial great achievement, but to your great and successful efforts to bring it to them. The billion people in Asia, half mankind, will learn that it is not man's inexorable fate to be sickly and to die young and that he can control nature and his destiny, that he can oppose voodoo with knowledge and reason, and that science can prevail if he will accept science."

The establishment of the Williams-Waterman Fund from the proceeds of your synthesis of thiamine was in itself a signal achievement and example; this has been recorded in the annual reports of the Fund, indicating that up to now some 230 grants-in-aid, amounting to about two and one-half millions of dollars, have already been used to advance our rolling frontier of nutritional and scientific knowledge. In these reports, however, little mention is made of the numbers of young men and women

who have been trained as a by-product of these grants. Many of them now occupy positions of responsibility and influence in universities and research centers.

In this respect, one of your admirers says: "Establishment of the Williams-Waterman Fund made possible many advances in nutrition knowledge, by providing for the training of many young men and women in scientific pursuits."

Another notes that grants-in-aid from the Williams-Waterman Fund to a single laboratory either initially trained or advanced the training of a group of young men and women, five of whom are now full Professors, with a supporting group of Associate Professors, Assistant Professors and Instructors. One is a Foundation Director; one is Director of a State Bureau of Nutrition; one is a Director of one of the National Institutes of Health; one is a Manager of Clinical Research for a large pharmaceutical company. How often this has been repeated by recipients of your funds I do not know. But in your report summing up the activities of your Fund while under your direction, may I suggest that they, too, be recorded. From these letters they must be numerous, indeed.

Just one more quote:

"I am the third child of four children. My elders before me both died in infancy—Mother said they were victims of 'taon' (infantile berberi). Mother had her first child at the age of sixteen; she was nineteen when I was born. And the year was 1919. Tikitiki extract which the Philippine Bureau of Science put out after your efforts wrought its 'miracle' on me . . . after I had developed paralysis of my lower extremities, the residual effects of which often bother me to this day.

"I write this in behalf of my Mother who, without knowing it at the time, owes her first live child to your work. It is no twist of fate that I have with zeal joined the fight against beriberi, a fact which I reveal for the first time. Whenever Mother repeats the tragedy of my elders she reiterates the anguish of millions of other mothers."

So, Bob, I present to you this bound book of letters which contains expressions of ad

miration and of respect from a mere hundred of the millions of persons who have already benefited from your work. It is only a slight token of the great admiration we all feel for

you as a man; as a scientist; and as a friend.

—NORMAN JOLLIFFE, M.D., Director  
Bureau of Nutrition, New York City

### Tribute to Dr. Robert R. Williams

It is truly a great honor and a rare privilege that has been given to me this evening, to pay tribute to an old friend and fellow worker who has not only accomplished great things in science but whose life and ideals have been a great inspiration to those around him. To know him is not only to admire him but to respect and to love him. There are many men who accomplish great things in research, but it is a rare combination that is found in Bob Williams of research ability, coupled with the determination and drive to follow up his research accomplishments with their application for the lasting benefit of mankind. His life really has consisted of several careers at the same time, but running through it you can see the path which led to the attainment of that rare satisfaction that so few men have the opportunity to experience—that of seeing the results of their work improve the lot of much of mankind.

Dr. Williams was born in Nellore, India, in 1886, the son of a Baptist missionary. It was undoubtedly the experiences of his boyhood in the missionary compound that did much to interest him in assisting the malnourished throughout the world. His ability to see and record accurately, as well as his human touch, are illustrated by his letters, treasured by his family and friends, which were written during his visit to India in 1950. I would like to read you a few sentences from the one he wrote when he revisited his birthplace at Nellore:

“Across the road the big banyan tree of our childhood years is gone; it died only a few months ago and leaves a great bare patch. . . . I stepped the distance off and found the branch of the parent tree could not have been less than 120 feet, probably more nearly 150 feet. I’ve told so many lies about it I wanted

to check up. It could not have been as much as 200 feet without touching both our bungalow and the seminary building. . . .

“Our old garden is still surrounded by a wall 4 feet high but is broken in spots just from age. . . . Now the cactus hedges which used to surround the compound have been killed off by the cochineal bug which the government brought in for that purpose years ago. There is simply no cactus of the once common type with ‘leaves’ the size of a man’s hand in all of south India. This is a great blessing as cactus was spreading everywhere and formed a great cover for the pest of cobras as we all remember how we used to see them by the dozen in the hedges. However, the loss of the cactus helps permit cattle, buffaloes and goats to wander over the compound and people, vehicles, etc., have made traffic lanes across it. . . . On this account, i.e., the cattle, the baptismal tank or pond north of the compound has been almost abandoned. By the way, I used to think of the tank (as all artificial ponds are called) as being miles from our bungalow but it is really not more than a half mile or so.”

Dr. Williams’ family brought him back to the United States when he was 10 years old, but as soon as he got his degree in chemistry from the University of Chicago he returned to the Orient by accepting a position in the Philippines where he came in contact with Dr. Edward B. Vedder of the U. S. Army Medical Corps. Vedder was much interested in beriberi and by substituting unpolished for polished rice eliminated beriberi from the Philippine scouts. Williams, working at the Philippine Bureau of Science from 1908 to 1912, tackled with Vedder the problem of the chemical identification of the factor in rice polishings which accounted for the relief of

