

## Dr. Herbert H. Gass

1904-1985



Within three months of each other, two of the great leaders and teachers in the field of leprosy have passed away. Dr. Herbert H. Gass and Dr. Robert Cochrane had much in common. Both were life-long

missionaries whose parents had also been missionaries. They each had three children, two boys and a girl, and each saw two of their children become missionaries, completing third generations of such service in each family. Both were dermatologists with excellent academic qualifications. Both served at different times as professors of dermatology and leprosy at the Christian Medical College at Vellore, India, and both were closely associated with the founding of the Schieffelin Leprosy Research and Training Centre at Karigiri in India. Both of them served for a time at the National Hansen's Disease Center at Carville, Louisiana, in the U.S.A. after they had retired from their work in India. Both were careful dedicated physicians, and both loved the microscope, preferring to be their own pathologists as they examined tissue biopsies from leprosy patients. In personal characteristics they were very different. In contrast to the confident, flamboyant, almost aggressive Robert Cochrane, who always seemed sure of himself, Herbert Gass was quiet, gentle, and retiring, preferring that others should receive the attention.

Herbert H. Gass was born in India of German-American parents. He lived and went to school there until he was 16 years old. He was thus fluent in the Hindi language and loved India and its people. He took his medical training at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, U.S.A., where he went on to study dermatology and then in 1930,

returned to India as a missionary of the Disciples of Christ to work in Madhya Pradesh in central India. There he became the medical superintendent of the Chankuri Leprosarium, which grew to become a 600 bed leprosy hospital. Dr. Gass served there for 17 years, and was instrumental in building up its facilities. He had to contend with great limitation of resources, and he had many stories to tell of how he would do operations by the light of kerosene lanterns whose light was concentrated on the surgical field by a series of mirrors. In his surgery on the foot, it was typical of him that he took biopsies of both soft tissues and bone. As a result, he was the first to report on the activity of *Mycobacterium leprae* in cancellous bone. True to the disciplined approach of his German heritage, Herbert Gass never slackened his insistence on the need for careful physical examination of every patient, and for a cautious, questioning approach to any diagnosis. While most of his colleagues may have been pressed by the numbers of patients who needed help, Herb would say that the one patient in front of him was his whole responsibility at that time. This characteristic made him both a wonderful teacher, and a fine investigator.

In 1950, Dr. Gass transferred to the Christian Medical College at Vellore, where he became Chief of Dermatology and Leprosy. It was during his time at Vellore that the Schieffelin Leprosy Research and Training Centre was being built, and he moved there with his family in 1953, occupying the first completed house in order to be on the spot to supervise the building of the hospital. When the institution was opened in 1955 he became its first superintendent.

Because the two institutions were close to each other, Dr. Gass was able to continue to head the dermatology department at Vellore Medical College until he retired to the U.S.A. in 1964. Back in America, even after 33 years, leprosy work had not lost its charm, and he came to the Public Health Service

Hospital at Carville to serve as Chief of the Training Branch. He also taught in the Dermatology Department of Louisiana State University.

Although his last few years in retirement were somewhat restricted by failing health, it was always possible to bring back a gleam to his eye and laughter to his voice. The best way to do this was to take him back in memory to India. Then he would become animated. Sitting cross-legged on the floor, thumping his fingers on a make-shift Indian

drum, swaying to the rhythm of Carnatic music, Herbert Gass would sing his loved Hindi songs and recall stories of his patients in Chankuri and Karigiri, and of the students to whom he taught the basics of good medicine and good religion. In them Herbert Gass lives on as an example of a really good physician and one who "Did justice, loved mercy and walked humbly with his God."

—Paul W. Brand