

OBITUARIES

OSWALD EVANS DENNEY

Senior Surgeon, United States Public Health Service

On February 19, 1944, towards evening, the flag of the United States Marine Hospital of Galveston, Texas, was lowered to half-mast: its Commanding Officer, Dr. Oswald E. Denney, was dead at the age of 59 years. He was born in Smyrna, Delaware. His death terminated thirty-one years in the medical profession, twenty-five of which were spent in the service of his country under the auspices of the United States Public Health Service. These services carried Doctor Denney from coast to coast of the United States, to South America, to the Philippines, and to the Panama Canal Zone. Few men were more conversant with tropical diseases; as a leprologist, he ranked among the foremost. Graduated from the University of Pennsylvania Medical School in 1913 at the age of twenty-eight, two years later he received the Diploma of Tropical Medicine from the University of the Philippines.

Realizing that "patients are the best text books," Doctor Denney accepted a position as resident physician at the Philippine General Hospital for one year. While studying closely the various diseases there treated, Dr. Denney gradually delimited his study and research to one disease, namely, leprosy. In order to follow up this interest, he spent the years of 1913-1914 as resident physician at the San Lazaro Hospital in Manila. More and more engrossed with a disease which has been aptly termed "the longest and the least known," Dr. Denney readily accepted the post, first, of Resident Physician and afterwards Chief Medical Officer in the Culion Leprosy Colony, then the largest organized Colony in the world. There for four years Dr. Denney studied leprosy in all the phases offered by the four thousand patients. Feeling that the transmission of leprosy was the chief problem, Dr. Denney concentrated his attention on this. While he could offer nothing definite in proof of its mode of communication at the end of his four years' study, he felt that his work was repaid in his having disproved many theories which had been entertained.

Following his services at Culion, Dr. Denney was appointed Executive Officer of the Fourth District of the U. S. Public Health Service, with headquarters in San Francisco. He remained there but one year, for when the United States Public Health Service, in 1921, decided to take over the care of all persons in the United States afflicted with leprosy Dr. Denney was the logical choice as the one to be placed in charge of that work.

After negotiations covering two years, the Federal Government bought from the state of Louisiana the leprosarium which that state had operated

for twenty-seven years, and, under the title of the United States Marine Hospital of Carville, Louisiana, converted it to national use, as one of the hospitals of the Public Health Service. Dr. Denney was appointed Commanding Officer. He entered upon his duties with an enthusiasm that equalled his ability, and, after a painstaking and thorough survey of the institution as it was handed over to the Federal Government, Dr. Denney made recommendations not only as to immediate needs but with the long range view that envisaged the institution to what it eventually became—the foremost leprosanarium in the world. New buildings replaced old until within seven years the Colony, with the exception of the administration building, had been completely rebuilt, and the bed capacity increased from ninety to four hundred. Under state tenure, a physician from New Orleans visited the institution weekly; under the federal auspices, Dr. Denney soon had rallied around him a staff of four resident physicians and four consulting specialists. Convinced that every phase of the patients' welfare merited his attention, Dr. Denney inaugurated an extensive work-and-play program for them, whereby practically every able-bodied patient was placed on the government pay-roll, while tennis courts, ball grounds, and golf links were laid out on grounds previously covered with weeds. Dr. Denney personally treated many of the patients, carefully following up the results of new treatments and checking on those a long time in use. He found time to contribute much to the literature on leprosy. By a methodical planning of his time, Dr. Denney's day was divided between his executive work, scientific research, medical practice, and professional writing.

In November 1920 Dr. Denney married Bertha Harris, also an employee of the United States Public Health Service. Mrs. Denney accompanied her husband to Carville, sharing his work and enthusiasm. Two of their four children were born while the family lived at Carville. Mrs. Denney was the center of the social life of the personnel of the Station. The Denneys were also warm friends of the Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, to whom the nursing service of the hospital was entrusted. Therefore when after fourteen years Dr. Denney was given a new assignment, his departure was a source of genuine regret to both patients and personnel.

In 1936 Dr. Denney was appointed Chief Quarantine Officer in the Panama Canal Zone. While attending his duties there, he kept up his interest in leprosy by making frequent trips to the island of Palo Seco, where patients with leprosy are isolated and treated. His health, however, tried by his long residence in debilitating climates, required a transfer, and in 1939 he returned to the United States, and for a time he made a tour through South America in the interest of the Pan-American Sanitary Bureau. In 1940 he was assigned as Medical Officer in Charge of the U. S. Marine Hospital at Galveston, Texas, and Chief Quarantine Officer for the Port of Galveston, both of which positions he held at the time of his death.

Dr. Denney was a fellow of the American College of Physicians; fellow of the American Medical Association; member of the American Society of Tropical Medicine, Association of Military Surgeons of the United States, International Leprosy Association, American Legion, Phi Chi, Sigma Xi, and a member of the Medical Advisory Board of the Leonard Wood Memorial.

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