

T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection

ABSTRACT

INTERVIEWEE NAME: Michael Ellis

COLLECTION: 4700.2774

IDENTIFICATION: Ear, nose and throat doctor; Former president, Louisiana State Medical Society

INTERVIEWER: Trenton James

SERIES: Louisiana State Medical Society

INTERVIEW DATE: May 6, 2016

FOCUS DATES: 1960s-2016

ABSTRACT:

Tape 4753

Michael Sydney Ellis was born October 3, 1941 in New Orleans; parents were Sydney Ellis, Junior and Henrietta "Peggy" Elder, both from New Orleans; father worked for New Orleans Public Service; in fifth grade, family moved to Pass Christian, Mississippi; Ellis graduated as valedictorian from Pass Christian High School; did three-year undergraduate program at LSU to get into medical school; worked construction and oil rigs during summer; assisted neurologist Gregg Ferriss with his sleep apnea research; imperfect vision kept him from entering the naval academy; started LSU in chemical engineering, hated it; father set up opportunity for him to shadow a lawyer and a doctor in their work; much more impressed by doctor C.D. Taylor, so decided to follow in his footsteps; undergraduate involvement in Sigma Alpha Epsilon fraternity; shocked by discrimination when his fraternity rejected Ellis' Cuban roommate, Julio Acosta; Acosta tried to return to Cuba for Bay of Pigs, Ellis' father stopped him; Acosta's later CIA career and imprisonment in Cuba; roomed with classmate Henry Amos in New Orleans; worked during summers to pay for medical school; signed up for the Berry Plan so he could do his military service and be a flight surgeon; decided he didn't like being in the military, wanted out; assigned to duty at Gulfport, Mississippi, instead of seeing the world as he'd hoped; he and two of his buddies all wanted to become ENTs, assigned to different Seabee battalions and sent to Vietnam; Ellis got chance to rotate out of duty early, managed to tour Europe using embassy flights; meanwhile, he was worried about his wife who was in Paris making friends with Vietnamese people that Ellis suspected were Vietcong; his first marriage only lasted till the end of his residency; gave up his planned residency in Saint Louis so his wife could accept job teaching French at New Orleans Country Day School; Ellis has been in New Orleans since; problems at Charity Hospital—no air conditioning, poor pay, no patient privacy; Ellis helped organize the Charity Hospital Association of Interns and Residents; there was only one crash cart in the whole hospital; explanation of crash cart; the association's demands included fans, privacy

curtains and a crash cart for every floor; Ellis was elected president of the intern and resident association; administration's efforts to oust him from Charity in retaliation for trying to improve conditions; Ellis stood up to administration and the association won all of its demands; gained an understanding of organized medicine: "Because as an individual nobody heard me. But once I was representing several hundred interns and residents, all of a sudden you get doors opened."; involvement with parish medical societies; couldn't break through to be a state delegate in Orleans or Jefferson Parish because slots filled by good ole boys network; so he founded the St. Bernard Parish Medical Society; appreciated power of the state medical society; became delegate to the AMA; first motion Ellis put forth related to confidentiality of military medical records, inspired by an incident in Danang when an officer tried to make him break confidentiality; his motion was successful; the idea for health savings accounts originated in Louisiana; spent 20 years as an AMA delegate and eight years on council for long-range planning; elected president of Louisiana State Medical Society in 1998; Ellis went into his presidency with a massive agenda; his efforts to achieve it; research he did to find out what was needed; massive amount of time and meetings; founding of MD Health Shares; doctors were much more heavily involved in hospitals back then; "The apathy of the typical physician today is very distressing to me."; physician Jose Garcia-Ollier organized hospital medical staffs; his efforts scared the AMA into forming the organized medical staff division; describes his final speech as president, using baseball analogy of hitting homeruns to accomplish all his goals; Ellis was probably the only state medical society president who didn't want to relinquish presidency because he liked it so much; involvement of leaders sets the pattern for the whole society; after Hurricane Katrina, Ellis went to Houston; since he had everybody's email addresses, he was able to help people connect who'd lost track of each other in hurricane aftermath; Ellis helped assemble influential physicians for a Katrina fundraiser in Houston; people in Houston were very welcoming and helped Ellis get hospital privileges; many wealthy people and athletes came to fundraiser five days after Katrina, raised \$660,000 that night; AMA and Texas Medical Association gave Louisiana State Medical Society financial help post-Katrina; on a radio interview, Ellis cited Louisiana problems as lack of inspirational leadership, a plan, and a mechanism of communicating that to the public; Louisiana still has those problems; efforts to rebuild and revise state medical policies after Katrina resulting in a plan called Health Access Louisiana [HAL]; many organizations and individuals involved in healthcare reform in Louisiana, including Floyd Buras and Fred Cerise; some stakeholders' interest was in protecting Charity Hospital, rather than accepting the state medical society's plan; Medicaid is one-third of the state budget, which includes social services; "We have more nursing home beds at a higher cost per capita than any state in the union."; nursing homes are untouchable because they're owned by legislators and their families; Ellis spent a whole year traveling around promoting HAL, not practicing medicine; they finally got the plan accepted, but two weeks later, Governor Blanco reversed that decision; "Senator McPherson and Governor Blanco killed it. And killed our opportunity to number one improve. And we're still last in the nation. Or second to last, thanks to Mississippi. Second to last in the nation and first in cost."; describes what it was like to be on commission for Governor Blanco; nothing came of her commission; importance of teaching medical students about the economics of medicine and the role of politics and organized medicine; explanation of politics of medicine; Louisiana has more lawyers than doctors; average lawyer donates more than \$5,000 per year to political campaigns, while average doctor donates 50 dollars; "Now is it any wonder that the lawyers get whatever the hell they want out of the legislature and we don't?"; doctors would have much more clout if they unified; shockingly low number of doctors

participate in organized medicine; the system is now so complex that graduating medical students aren't prepared to do real world medicine; students and residents aren't allowed to do many of the procedures that they could when Ellis was learning medicine; most graduating residents today will be employees of hospitals or insurance entities; merging hospitals, insurance companies and pharmacies become incredibly powerful; once doctors lose all power, they unionize; Union of British Physicians strike; many physicians won't accept Medicaid patients because the reimbursement is too low; Ellis is getting ENT patients referred to him from around the state because they're being turned away; Ellis regretted having to turn away patients earlier in his practice: "If I had opened my doors and said I'm going to take all Medicaid patients, I guarantee within one week, I'd have a line around the block. I wouldn't be able to see anybody who could actually make my expenses."; physicians now take up a smaller percentage of the Medicaid budget while pharmacists have increased due to cost of drugs; pharmaceutical companies can charge whatever they want; medical care is expensive because people aren't paying for it themselves and because insurance companies keep their negotiated prices secret; explanation of charges versus allowable costs; patients don't find out how much they have to pay until after they get treatment; the only true cost data is Medicare and Medicaid physician fee schedules; on average, hospitals collect 24% of their charges and physicians, 35%; Hurricane Katrina left more than a foot of water on the roofs of his offices in New Orleans East and Chalmette; "So a bulldozer had to be taken to the offices. So I lost everything. And unfortunately we had almost no insurance."; explains how insurance had lapsed; he was 65 at the time and didn't want to retire, but it was too much to rebuild; retired for a year, then looked for a new position; offers from around the country; took a job in Gastonia, NC for two years doing ENT; returned to New Orleans to work at Tulane; took call until he was 72, when he had a weekend from hell and said no more; now Ellis sees 80% of all the new patients at the clinic; no longer does big surgeries; problems of billing for cosmetic procedures; Ellis is on a flat salary so has little incentive to go above and beyond; economics of hospital-based clinics versus private physicians; explains the geography and history of his Lakeview neighborhood, and how being 9.5 feet above sea level enabled his house to survive Katrina; explains how Irving Blatt brought otolaryngologist Merv Trail to LSU; Blatt's father-in-law was the famous otologist Julius Lempert; Ellis also worked with world-renowned auditory physiologist Chuck Berlin, who developed the Kresge Institute; Merv Trail was a founding member of Krewe of Bacchus, and was involved with recruiting movie stars like Charlton Heston to be parade kings; Berlin and Trail both played tennis; George Lyons took over department when Blatt got into political trouble and left; after finishing his medical training, Ellis went into practice with Trail; Trail was partners with Wally Rubin; Ellis got along great with Trail, but couldn't stand working with the eccentric and dictatorial Rubin; went into practice on his own; Trail became chancellor of the LSU system and was largely responsible for LSU taking over the Charity Hospital system; Trail died prematurely of a massive stroke; the LSU system, and especially Charity, would be different if Trail hadn't died; Trail supported Ellis when Charlie Mary tried to get him thrown out of his residency; Ellis' involvement in Krewe of Bacchus; his children were born when he was in his forties; "Then once you have a daughter, you're going to want her presented to society and do the debut and be a queen of a ball and all that kind of stuff, so I joined a bunch of the social organizations in the city."; involvement with Krewe of Rex; explains the hierarchy of New Orleans social organizations; has served on the state medical society's interprofessional committee for at least 35 years; the committee members are doctors and lawyers; "The typical doctor knows nothing about how they're supposed to interact with lawyers."; explains the

difference between a fact witness and an expert witness; the committee helps doctors understand how to work with lawyers; importance of doctors having contracts with lawyers before serving as expert witnesses; all the law students but none of the medical students attend the committee's educational programs, because medical students don't understand the impact of law; best practices for informed consent forms; Ellis enjoys writing letters to the editor about the healthcare system; the state medical society means a tremendous amount to Ellis; he is devoted to both LSU and Tulane, and teaches at both; medical students today are brilliant, but want nine to five jobs and aren't interested in joining medical organizations and working for bigger things; Ellis tells the story of a man coming in to his office who'd unnecessarily had a tracheotomy tube in for six months, due to hospital negligence; he sees many primary care providers who aren't doctors and don't understand the patients' problems, so send them to him, a specialist; "They're basically becoming triage agents."; primary care providers send him patients with insufficient information about what's been done for them so far; Ellis served on a Louisiana healthcare commission for two years: "Then I realized it was a worthless thing, so I gave it up."; electronic medical records sound great in theory, but don't work so seamlessly in real life; "I've been very, very happy with the practice of medicine. I still enjoy practicing medicine in spite of all these hassles and what have you. It's still the best profession out there."; is grateful for his training; upcoming fiftieth medical school reunion.

TAPE: 1 (T4753)

TOTAL PLAYING TIME: 2 hours, 10 minutes

PAGES TRANSCRIPT: 63

PHOTOGRAPHS / PHOTOGRAPHER: 12 digital photos

OTHER MATERIALS: LSMS president's minutes; LSMS president's report; president's speech; CV; resume

RESTRICTIONS: None