

Harold W. Brown, Dean-in-a-Pinch

The creation of the University of Puerto Rico School of Medicine required someone who could recruit faculty, plan the curriculum, set up the admissions process, and insure that the school meet accreditation requirements. Despite setbacks, chancellor Jaime Benítez found in Dr. Harold W. Brown a person with the knowledge and abilities to accomplish these tasks. Although Brown would not accept the deanship of the school, he was detailed by Columbia University to serve as Benítez's special advisor. In this role, he intervened at key points in the school's development and was able to accomplish his mission. Benítez gave credit to Brown for the school's development, and Brown's contributions were duly recognized when the School graduated its first class in 1954. [*PR Health Sci J* 2011;30:90-92]

When the University of Puerto Rico decided to create a school of medicine in the late 1940s, the goal was to do so "at the earliest possible date, at the smallest possible cost, and of the highest possible service" (1). The question of who would lead the school was of primary importance. Chancellor Jaime Benítez, under whose purview the school would function, was intent on appointing someone who could both plan the school, and run it once it was operational. Benítez recruited Dr. Robert Lambert to help during the planning process. Lambert had once directed Puerto Rico's School of Tropical Medicine under the aegis of Columbia University, and was thus familiar with local conditions. By early 1949, Benítez was working "to persuade Dr. Lambert to stay with us and assume responsibility for launching the medical school project" (2).

Lambert and Benítez, however, disagreed on a key issue: the location of the school. Lambert believed that the new medical school should be permanently based at the School of Tropical Medicine, while Benítez favored starting the school in the existing facilities, but later moving it to a planned Medical Center in Río Piedras. This disagreement was a deal-breaker: Lambert turned down the offer, which Benítez nevertheless reiterated was "unqualified, permanent, and ever-pressing" (3).

In May 1949, after the Puerto Rican Legislature had officially authorized the creation of the School of Medicine, Benítez approached the University's former partner, Columbia University, for advice and support. Columbia detailed Dr. Harold W. Brown, acting director of the Columbia School of Public Health, to Puerto Rico to serve as Benítez's "special advisor." While Brown lacked Lambert's insider status, he more than made up for this by his impressive credentials. Brown had no fewer than five degrees, three of them doctorates. These



Dr. Harold W. Brown

included a Doctor of Science from Johns Hopkins, an MD from Vanderbilt, and a Doctor of Public Health from Harvard (4). He had also been dean of the School of Public Health of the University of North Carolina. As a result, there was practically no aspect of scientific research, medicine, or public health with which he was not acquainted.

Brown had a full agenda: his task was to recruit faculty, establish the procedures to admit students, and design a curriculum, all "in conformity with the highest possible medical norms" (5). By fall 1949, a year before the school was to open, Benítez could report that his special advisor had "an excellent grasp of the situation" and had earned "everybody's affection and respect" (6). Benítez also predicted that Brown would become "a really significant figure" on the island if he could stay long enough to shape the orientation and attitudes of the new school (6). Indeed, Brown not only handled all logistics related to the school, but also exercised remarkable managerial skills while serving as troubleshooter, power broker, and mediator. He also deflected any criticism that would otherwise be aimed at Benítez, freeing the chancellor to secure public and legislative support for the new undertaking. Not surprisingly, Benítez described the process as a "love-feast" and wondered how long the goodwill would last (6).

In 11 months, Brown assembled a faculty, acquired the equipment needed for teaching, recruited and selected a class of 50 first-year students, and designed the first two years of the curriculum (6). Having handled these tasks with dispatch, Brown was offered the school's deanship by Benítez, an offer he turned down because of his commitment to Columbia. He instead began the process of recruiting a suitable candidate for the position.

After a few tentative candidates from Puerto Rico did not accept the job, Benítez authorized Brown to widen the search.

Brown's choice was Dr. Donald S. Martin, professor of preventive medicine and public health at Duke University. Benítez agreed with the choice, and his decision was subsequently ratified by the Superior Educational Council in January 1950, a mere 8 months before the school opened its doors.

But the planning process that had proceeded very smoothly under Brown became rocky and acrimonious following Martin's acceptance of the deanship. Martin and Benítez did not see eye-to-eye on personal matters, and these discrepancies spilled over into the academic arena. Martin felt that the University had not honored some of the perquisites that he had been promised at the time of his interview, and grew increasingly unhappy with his situation. Benítez, who considered Martin's requests to be petty and frivolous, opted to ignore the dean's petitions and requests for meetings (7). Effectively cut off from the chain of command, Martin called and wrote the chancellor repeatedly to discuss the clinical curriculum and the administrative support required to expose students to patient care during their clinical years. Unable to set up a meeting or even reach Benítez on the telephone, Martin finally tendered his resignation in February 1952, leaving key decisions concerning the clinical years unaddressed, and the future accreditation of the school in jeopardy (8). For maximum impact, Martin also sent his resignation letter to the newspaper *El Mundo*, and to Dr. Harold W. Brown.

Caught by surprise, Benítez needed a *deus ex machina* who would appear on the scene and begin setting things right. The matter had particular urgency because Martin's announcement coincided with the arrival in Puerto Rico of two representatives from the American Medical Association's Council on Medical Education, who were on the island to inspect the school. Determined to show the visitors that the University was not wavering in its commitment to "a first-class, accredited institution" (9), Benítez once more appealed to Columbia for help, requesting Brown's support at a time of pressing need. "I realize that Dr. Brown has important duties at Columbia," conceded Benítez, "but I am sure our gain by his temporary stay here will mean much more to us in Puerto Rico than the loss to Columbia" (9).

Columbia again agreed that Brown should go to Puerto Rico to take charge of the delicate situation. This time, however, Benítez appointed him dean. The announcement was made a mere two days after Martin's letter had been made public (10). Although the appointment was time-limited, it came at a critical juncture and was designed to save Benítez from the embarrassment of Martin's departure and the school from a possible failure to gain accreditation. As Benítez wrote to the dean of Columbia's College of Physicians and Surgeons:

Dr. Brown has been my mainstay here for three years and is obviously the person best qualified to take over the whole responsibility and stay as Dean for the rest of his life. This would settle at least 90% of my medical headaches, but he does not see his way clear to even consider that possibility (11).

Soon, Benítez was urging Brown to prolong his stay. The chancellor praised Brown's "exceptional drive, devotion and good judgment" in bringing things under control (12). But planning for the clinical curriculum was behind schedule, and the chancellor wanted Brown to stay in Puerto Rico "for the next twenty years" (12). Nevertheless, Benítez recognized the impossibility of his request, and gave Brown a number of options, ranging from the broadest to the most restrictive. Writing the dean at Columbia, Benítez listed the alternatives:

Short of eternity, I would like to have him [Brown] stay as Dean until our first class graduates. If that is impossible, we would like to have him stay straight through until next spring. If that cannot be, we would like to have him in Puerto Rico with occasional flights to New York, until Christmas. [...] The third and fourth year policies ought to be set and problems straightened out with Brown in control, for the new program should not risk the floundering inherent on the advent of a new man (12).



Original faculty of the University of Puerto Rico School of Medicine. Dr. Harold Brown is sitting in the first row, third from left to right.

Pulled in two directions --- his duty to Columbia and his desire to be helpful to Puerto Rico --- Brown chose the third option and became acting dean. He therefore commuted between New York and San Juan while designing the curriculum for the clinical years and negotiating an affiliation with the San Juan Municipal Hospital, which would be the main teaching hospital for the school (13). Benítez described himself as "distressed, mortified, and frustrated" that Brown would not devote himself full-time to Puerto Rico's academic issues (13). Still, the chancellor was reconciled to the situation, and saw to it that Brown had the support he needed to complete the pressing tasks. Brown also had to recruit his replacement, because the American Medical Association had made clear that the school's dean had to be on site for the school to be accredited. Brown therefore recruited Dr. E. Harold Hinman, who was dean of the School of Public Health at the University

of Oklahoma. Brown, however, agreed to remain as acting dean until his successor was fully installed and comfortable in the job. By October 1952, Brown relinquished his title, agreeing to "assist in every way [...] in an unofficial capacity until accreditation has been achieved" (14). Benítez agreed to the arrangement, thereby altering the nature of what he considered "the happiest collaboration under fire and thereafter" that he had ever enjoyed (15).

In May 1954, a month before its pioneering first class was to graduate, the school was notified that it had been granted full approval as an accredited four-year medical school. When the news was published in the *Journal of Medical Education*, Brown sent Benítez the article with a note saying "You are now 'anointed'" (16). Benítez was quick to share the credit for the anointing: he gave due recognition to Brown's skills, citing his "nonrational tenacity" in striving for perfection. In all, Brown had taken 68 flights to meet his obligations in both New York and San Juan. At graduation, Brown was awarded special university honors in recognition of the University of Puerto Rico's "everlasting appreciation and gratitude" for his "extraordinary services in the planning, organization, and orientation of the School of Medicine" (17).

But Brown's work in Puerto Rico was not over. After resuming the position of director of Columbia's School of Public Health, he returned to the island to study the feasibility of creating a dental school as part of the University of Puerto Rico. He recommended that such training was needed, a recommendation that was approved by the academic and legislative authorities in 1956. The School of Dentistry began in 1957, and was accredited four years later.

In 1988, when Brown died in New York at the age of 86, the obituary in *The New York Times* summarized his long and productive administrative career with the following line: "An expert on tropical diseases, Dr. Brown was formerly the Director of the School of Public Health at Columbia and dean of the University of Puerto Rico's College of Medicine" (18).

Resumen

La fundación de la Escuela de Medicina de la Universidad de Puerto Rico requería alguien que pudiera reclutar facultad, planificar el currículo, desarrollar el proceso de admisiones, y asegurar que la escuela cumpliera con los requisitos de acreditación académica. A pesar de percances y contratiempos, el rector Jaime Benítez encontró en el doctor Harold W. Brown la persona idónea para llevar a cabo estas tareas. Aunque Brown no aceptó el puesto de decano, fue destacado por Columbia University para asesorar a Benítez. En esa capacidad, Brown intervino en momentos críticos en el desarrollo de la escuela y

cumplió su compromiso. Benítez le dio crédito a Brown por el desarrollo de la escuela. Las contribuciones de Brown fueron debidamente reconocidas cuando la Escuela graduó su primera clase en 1954.

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