Tinsley R. Harrison (1900 – 1978)

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Figure 1. Painting of Tinsley R. Harrison in Volker Hall at the University of Alabama School of Medicine, Birmingham, Alabama.

Tinsley Randolph Harrison (Figures 1 and 2) was a very influential physician of the twentieth century. He is famous worldwide for his book Harrison’s Principles of Internal Medicine, which was written in 1950 and published in 14 different languages. Harrison was born in Talladega, Alabama, on March 18, 1900. Harrison planned to study law at Harvard, but in 1919, he followed his father’s career and began medical school at the University of Michigan, and finished his training at John Hopkins University in Baltimore.1 Groce Harrison, Tinsley Harrison’s father, was a sixth-generation physician who had been influenced by Sir William Osler to persuade his son to become a physician.2 Harrison completed his residency at Peter Bent Brigham Hospital (now Harvard

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University’s Brigham and Women’s Hospital) before returning to Johns Hopkins. In 1925, Harrison joined the hospital and medical school at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, as the chief resident in internal medicine and later joined the faculty. During his time at Vanderbilt, Harrison contributed greatly to the understanding of medicine by publishing over 107 papers, and also two editions of *Failure of the Circulation* in 1935 and 1938.³

Harrison touched many lives through his passion for bedside teaching, philosophy of education and medicine, and thought-provoking research. In 1941, he accepted a position to become the founding chair of medicine at Wake Forest University’s Bowman Gray School of Medicine in North Carolina. Here, he began the tradition of holding clinical pathological conferences on Monday nights to discuss case presentations with proper assessments and diagnoses.¹ In 1944, Harrison served as a dean and chair of medicine at the UT – Southwestern School of Medicine in Dallas, Texas. During this time, Harrison continued to explore his interests in the pathophysiological mechanisms of disease and cardiovascular medicine. He became notorious for prescribing nitroglycerin paste, to be rubbed on the body, for the treatment of angina.⁴ In 1950, Harrison returned to Birmingham, Alabama, and became the second dean of the Medical College of Alabama and chair of its department of medicine. In 1970, Harrison retired to become a Distinguished Physician of the U.S. Veterans Administration, where he remained until his death on August 4, 1978. Harrison distinguished himself as a leader in the medical community. He was the president of the American Society of Clinical Investigation in 1939, a founder and the first president of the Society of Clinical Investigation in 1946, a founding member of the Council of the National Heart Institute, and the president of the American Heart Association in 1948.³ He also

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*Figure 2. Sculpture of Tinsley R. Harrison outside the Tinsley Harrison Research Tower at the University of Alabama School of Medicine, Birmingham, Alabama.*
received the Kober Medal in 1968 and the Master Teacher Award by the American College of Cardiology in 1970.  

REFERENCES