

National Doctor's Day- Is there a Doctor in the House- er, Tree?



Dr. Edward A. McMurray, probably about 1925 after finishing college. (*Click to enlarge.*)

[McMurray Family, Helbling Family](#) (*Click for Family Tree*)

Our Congress really does get important things done... and they really can work together if they try. Think back to 1990 when, with *overwhelming* approval, both Congress *and* the House passed S.J. #366 to declare 'National Doctor's Day.' The bill had just been introduced that year, and Pres. George H.W. Bush signed it in October- less than 10 months from start to finish! Public Law 101-473 thus took effect on March 30, 1991, proclaiming March 30 as a national day to celebrate the contributions of physicians throughout our history.

We do have at least two ancestors who were physicians, and one uncle.

McMurray Edw A (Elna M) MD 21 Jasper County Savings
Bank bldg h619 S 8th av W

Dr. Edward A. McMurray and his wife Elna Mae Kenner McMurray in the 1939 Newton, Iowa City Directory. His office was in the bank building at that time, and his home was on S 8th Ave. W. (Click to enlarge.)

Dr. Edward A. McMurray

Both of the sons born to William Elmer McMurray and Lynette (Payne) McMurray, Edward A. McMurray (1900-1992) and his brother Herbert C. McMurray (1911-1989), became doctors.



Herbert C. McMurray

Herbert McMurray, Newton (Iowa) High School Yearbook, 1929. Herbert was one of only six young men at Newton High to be inducted into the National Athletic Honorary

*Society. The
Society required
high academic
achievement as well
as outstanding
athletic
work. (Click to
enlarge.)*

Within the family, Edward was lovingly called, "The Doctor." He specialized in Ear, Eye, Nose, and Throat problems, after a residency in New York City around 1940. (His son Edward A. McMurray, Jr., remembered going to the 1939 World's Fair in New York City with him one summer during that residency.) Back then, 'The Doctor's' specialty was known as "EENT." Now that specialty has split- we have ophthalmologists- doctors who specialize in eyes only, and other doctors called 'otorhinolaryngologists' or ENTs, who cover the ear, nose, and throat areas. But Dr. McMurray could do it all, and his out-of-state grandchildren got their annual eye (and ENT) check when visiting him in Iowa!

I have already written a detailed post about the medical career of Dr. E. A. McMurray (1900-1992) in Newton, Iowa- see ["Workday Wednesday- Dr. Edward A. McMurray."](#) His brother Herbert C. McMurray (1911-1989) practiced in the Ballwin, Missouri area.

Dr. John H. O'Brien

If you are a descendant of Gerard William/William Gerard "G. W." Helbling (1882-1971), then you are also descended from Dr. John H. O'Brien (1808-1887), who was G.W.'s maternal (mother's) grandfather. Dr. O'Brien was born in Ireland and attended the University of Dublin. A letter to the University has not provided any specific information about him as a student, although there was a Dr. John O'Brien working there

as the Librarian of the King and Queen's College of Physicians in 1841. This cannot be the same Dr. John O'Brien, as our known ancestor had immigrated to America in 1831. (Perhaps it was his father or an uncle? O'Brien is a common name in Ireland though so the Librarian may not have been related at all.)

Dr. O'Brien immigrated in 1831, and was in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania by 1832. It was a tough time to be a doctor in western Pennsylvania- a cholera epidemic, spread by contaminated water, was taking place on the frontier.

The inscription on his headstone was very appropriate for a physician:

*Blessed is he that understandeth concerning
the needy and the poor, the Lord will deliver
him in the evil day. -XL Psalm*



Dr. John H. O'Brien-
headstone detail (Click to
enlarge.)

Dr. O'Brien and his wife Jane (Neel) O'Brien were early settlers of the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania suburbs, and he was a successful doctor in the Pittsburgh area. (He is often listed as "J. H. O'Brien" in directories.) A previous post tells a

bit more about Dr. O'Brien and his family: "[Tombstone Tuesday- Dr. John H. O'Brien.](#)" We will tell more of the family story in upcoming posts.



All of these doctors would be amazed at today's healthcare. Dr. E. A. McMurray, who died in 1992 but had been retired for a number of years, saw the beginnings of this incredible age of medicine. Dr. O'Brien, however, may have been paid in farm products, especially in his early years in America and while on the frontier, where hard cash was hard to come by. (If memory serves, Dr. McMurray was sometimes paid with goods as well, especially in his early years as a general practitioner in a small town with surrounding rural areas.) The 'germ theory of disease' was not fully understood or accepted until at least the 1850s, and really into the 1880s. John Snow wrote his theory of the transmission of cholera in 1849, and mapped cholera epidemics in London in the early 1850s. Not fully accepted even when he stopped the epidemic, it was too late for our Dr. O'Brien to use this information to help stem the disease in Western Pennsylvania. Viruses were discovered in the 1890s, after Dr. O'Brien's death and just 10 years before Dr. E. A. McMurray was born. Some arsenic-based synthetic antibacterials had been used after 1907 for some diseases, but Dr. McMurray was already through medical school when penicillin was described in 1928; antibiotics were not widely available, however, until after World War II.

From using genetics to determine treatment, to the incredibly complex machines we have available for diagnosis and treatment, to how medical care is paid for (and how insurance companies think they know more about appropriate patient care than a personal doctor), today's medicine would be astounding to all these learned doctors!

Notes, Sources, and References:

1. "Dublin Almanac and General Register of Ireland for the Year of Our Lord 1841," p. 151, Ancestry.com.
2. "[Tombstone Tuesday- Dr. John H. O'Brien](http://heritageramblings.net/2014/01/14/tombstone-tuesday-dr-john-h-obrien/)" may be found at <http://heritageramblings.net/2014/01/14/tombstone-tuesday-dr-john-h-obrien/>
3. More mentions of these men can be found on our blog by searching for the names "McMurray" or "O'Brien."
4. For our younger readers, a brief explanation of our title is probably warranted. In earlier times, if someone got sick in a theater or hotel, the cry, "Is there a doctor in the house??" would go through the audience and hallways in order to get fast medical assistance to the victim. (It became a great comedy routine, too.) There were no cell phones, and even no phones at all, of course, depending on how far back one goes. In fact, calling 9-1-1 for emergency assistance was not instituted in the United States until 1968, and many communities did not have this resource available for its citizens even into the 1980s. (Probably before you were born.)

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1) For a blast from the past, watch Schoolhouse Rock: America
"I'm Just a
Bill.": <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FFroMQLKiag>