

## A Century of Medical Practice

Conversation with Charles J. Collins, MD

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Can you imagine working so hard and so long that you would go to bed with your shoes on so as to be ready to get up quickly and get to the hospital to deliver another baby? Can you, in your wildest dreams, then imagine collecting the fee for this midnight service, deposit it in an account and give it to the doctor whose patient you had delivered? Can you imagine doing this for four years and feeling responsible to give the money away? This would be a most unusual doctor indeed. But Charles J. Collins, MD was and is a most unusual doctor. Yesterday, during a conversation in his room in Westminster Towers, Dr. Collins told me that he loved being a doctor. "You never stop being a doctor." "I did a hysterectomy the other night in my dreams... I was also anxious about a patient I had forgotten to round on in the hospital because of a busy office schedule... It was a relief to wake up and realize it was a dream."

Dr. Charles J. Collins is a bright, urbane 95 year old. Born at the start of the twentieth century, March 23, 1900, in St Augustine, Florida he states "I always knew I was going to study medicine." At age fifteen, a year too young to go to college, Charles accompanied country doctor, Sam Houch, MD, on calls around Cartersville, Georgia, read his medical textbooks and looked through his microscope. On Saturday afternoons he would go to the farms in the doctor's horse and buggy to collect fees. "I usually came back with more produce than cash." One weekend he returned with the black bag to remove stitches from a woman whose appendix had been removed on the kitchen table. On another day he poured ether while Dr. Houch amputated a crushed arm in the office. He borrowed money from his grandfather to attend Emory Medical School where he graduated first in his class in 1921. Tuition, room and board were \$400 a year. "I paid it all back." Medical practice in Orlando began with Dr. Calvin D. Christ on August 3, 1925, seven years after Orange General Hospital opened. In 1938 he became the first Florida physician to be board certified in Obstetrics and Gynecology. Two years later he was president of the Orange County Medical Society of 25 members including Orange, Seminole and Osceola Counties

During World War II Charles Collins, MD was unable to serve in the armed forces due to phlebitis and a severe leg burn from a sterilizer spill. Most of the obstetricians were inducted leaving Dr. Collins to deliver between 50 to 60 babies a month. "Those were a very difficult four years... I sometimes had trouble keeping my eyes open during office hours... I lived at the hospital." Daily house calls for one week post partum were routine. His wife said that she believed that she was the only woman who slept with a husband with his shoes on. Many nights he slept downstairs on a couch so as to be able to get back to the delivery room quickly or get up early to begin rounds and surgery. Although he was unable to serve, Dr. Collins believed that he did more good

for the war effort by staying home. Patients who had lost their doctor to the war came from all over central Florida to have their babies delivered by Dr. Collins: Tampa, St Petersburg, Daytona and surrounding small communities. He recalls letters from husbands overseas thanking him for caring for their wives. "There were no pediatricians so I had to learn to take care of babies too. I had to learn how to feed babies." Because most of the doctors had been drafted, there was a paucity of medical care available to the community.

After the war Dr. Collins had a banquet for the returning doctor veterans. All fees collected for delivering the babies of physicians in the service had been placed in a bank account. At the conclusion of the banquet Dr. Collins gave each physician a check for the fees collected for the delivery of their patients in their absence. "They gave up something by going away to the service...I felt that I did not deserve this money because I stayed home... It was the right thing to do."

"I never sued a patient over a bill or sent them to a collection agency." Bills were sent for about six months, then written off if not paid. During the Depression many people were unable to pay their bills. Years later many sent partial or full payments. "People are basically honest." He recalls one incident in which a patient's husband stopped him at a baseball game as he was walking with his wife to the car. The man said, "You do not remember me but you delivered my wife twenty years ago and I never paid you. How much do I owe you?" "No, I do not remember you, but seventy five dollars was the usual fee", said Dr. Collins. The man pulled out a hundred dollar bill and gave it to Dr. Collins and started to walk away. Dr. Collins said just a minute and gave the man twenty five dollars change. "I had to declare that on my income taxes."

One evening Dr. Collins received an urgent telephone call from a man insisting on a house call for his wife. Dr Collins indicated that he was not doing house calls but would get a doctor to visit. The man sarcastically said "You are like all doctors who will not take care of sick people." Dr. Collins replied, "I will be at your house in twenty minutes." He searched for his black bag which contained a variety of pills and went to the house. The woman was intoxicated. He gave her a sedative and waited until she settled down. On the way out, the husband apologized saying, "I did not know how old you are. Here is ten dollars." which he stuck in Dr. Collins shirt pocket. Dr. Collins gave him back the money saying, "I did not do this for the money. I did this for professional relations. Keep the money." He was 70 years old.

Dr. Collins' achievements in medicine are legendary: President of Orange General Hospital medical staff, founding member and first President of Florida Obstetrics and Gynecology Society, President of the American Fertility Society, President of South Atlantic Obstetrics and Gynecology, Florida Medical Association Certificate of Merit, Fellow of the American College of Surgeons and of the American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology, but none match his humble, gracious respect for fellow physicians and above all his patients. "I have had a very good life... I had a lot of good years."

What is the price of style? There is no price. You either have it or you don't. It is natural and comes from deep down inside.

Thank you Dr. Collins for representing medicine well in the twentieth century. You have established a superior standard.