



William P. Murphy

February 6, 1892 - October 9, 1987

Brookline, Massachusetts

William Parry Murphy, the Boston physician who helped turn a sure death sentence into a treatable illness and shared the 1934 Nobel Prize for it, died in Brookline, Massachusetts, on October 9, 1987. He was ninety-five, and the last surviving member of the trio honored that year.

He was born on February 6, 1892, in Stoughton, Wisconsin, the son of a Congregational minister, and grew up in Wisconsin and Oregon. He graduated from the University of Oregon in 1914 and taught high school mathematics and physics for a time to save money for medical school. He earned his medical degree at Harvard in 1922 and began practice in Boston, where he joined the staff at the Peter Bent Brigham Hospital.

At the time, pernicious anemia was fatal. Patients grew pale and weak as their bodies failed to make healthy red blood cells, and nothing stopped the decline. Building on George Whipple's work with anemic dogs, Murphy and his colleague George Minot began feeding patients large amounts of lightly cooked liver in 1925. Murphy did much of the painstaking bedside work, counting immature red cells day after day to show that the patients' blood was recovering. In 1926 they reported that the diet brought patients back to health.

The work led eventually to the discovery of vitamin B12, and the liver diet gave way to concentrated extracts and then injections. In 1934 Murphy, Minot and Whipple received the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine.

Murphy spent the rest of his career in Boston, teaching at Harvard, treating patients and writing a substantial text on anemia. He kept a private practice well into old age. He and his wife, Pearl, had two children. The patients who walked out of his clinic, pink-cheeked after years of fading, were the best testimony to what the

quiet doctor from Wisconsin accomplished.

Services

Died in Brookline, Massachusetts, October 9, 1987, aged 95. Co-recipient of the 1934 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine with George Minot and George Whipple for liver therapy in pernicious anemia. Portrait: Nobel Foundation photograph (public domain), hosted by Notice Nearby.

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