The Medical Legacy Of George Herman Babe Ruth

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Introduction

Babe Ruth was one of the most beloved and recognized figures of American life in the twentieth century. Ruth rose like a phoenix from the most humble of origins to eventually take his rightful place among the most revered and cherished individuals the world has yet encountered. Ruth’s initial rise to fame was a direct result of his superhuman prowess on the baseball diamond but, his iconic status could not have been achieved without his humanitarian efforts to inspire and raise the quality of life for his fellow man. Endless examples of Ruth’s charitable works abound but no where is his concern for humanity more evident than in the final two years of his life (1946-1948). Ruth was fighting a valiant battle against nasopharyngeal carcinoma. The cancer was exacting a horrible toll on Ruth but, he bravely accepted experimental cancer therapy in order to help medical research gain valuable information to treat individuals with this relatively rare form of cancer in the future.

The medical community, in particular, and the population, in general, today directly benefit from the medical information garnered from the medical research performed on this very willing superstar. Ruth remains an inspiration today and a reminder of the tremendous contribution human research subjects make to our wealth of medical knowledge.

George Herman "Babe" Ruth

Ruth was born on February 6, 1895 (1) to a couple of German ancestry in Baltimore, Maryland. Ruth’s parents were hard-working tavern owners who had little time to control their energetic and adventurous son. Ruth’s father, on June 13, 1902, brought young George to St. Mary’s Industrial School for Boys. St. Mary’s was located only a few miles south of the Ruth family home but provided a life for George which greatly contrasted with the life he had previously known on the rough waterfront streets of Baltimore. St. Mary’s was run by the Xaverian Brothers who provided discipline, order, and love for the children in their care. George was particularly fortunate to have been placed under the mentorship of Br. Matthias. Br. Matthias was a physically large man with an equally large heart. He introduced George to the game of baseball. George thrived at St. Mary’s and his almost supernatural talent at baseball soon became evident to everyone. His first home run was hit at the amazingly young age of 7 over the right fielder’s head (2).

George was recruited to play professional baseball and soon became known as “Babe” to the world. He started his major league career with the Boston Red Sox and was later traded in the most infamous of all sports trades to the rival New York Yankees. It was with the Yankees that Ruth became a most beloved international celebrity. All the while Ruth always remembered the lessons of humanitarianism and charity that he had learned so well during his days at St. Mary’s.

On June 7, 1921 his most precious daughter, Dorothy, was born. Dorothy was Babe’s only biological child and was a most faithful daughter to Babe throughout his life. Dorothy wrote of her times with her father in her book, “My Dad, the Babe: Growing up with an American Hero” (3). She would aid her father on his multitude of visits to children in hospitals throughout the world and would continue to spread Babe’s message of charity long after his death until her own passing on May 18, 1989.

Many of Ruth’s individual major league baseball records still stand seventy five years after his retirement from the sport. Among these records are most total bases and highest slugging percentage.

Nasopharyngeal Carcinoma

Nasopharyngeal carcinoma (NPC) is a relatively rare cancer in the United States. However, it is a leading form of cancer in middle-aged natives of southern China, southeast Asia, the Arctic, North Africa, and the Middle East (4). The risk factors for NPC include viruses, genetic factors, the consumption of salted fish (5), and environmental factors (6).

NPC occurs more frequently in men than in women and is most frequently diagnosed in the sixth decade of life.

The Initial Treatments and Misdiagnoses of Ruth

Ruth suffered through many misdiagnoses at various hospitals in New York City at the onset of his symptoms. In September of 1946 Ruth presented to the French Hospital with the left side of his face swollen and his left eye completely shut. He was diagnosed with either a toothache or sinusitis and his treatment consisted of penicillin and the extraction of three teeth.

In November of 1946 his physicians, again at the French Hospital, diagnosed his condition as Horner Syndrome when a radiograph revealed a large mass at the base of his skull (7). Ruth was later misdiagnosed once again as having...
laryngeal carcinoma based on his supposed history of heavy alcohol and tobacco consumption. Ruth underwent Radiation Therapy in November of 1946 and then, in December of 1946, he underwent unsuccessful surgical resection of the tumor. This surgery left him unable to swallow thus requiring a feeding tube (7).

Dr. Richard Lewisohn

Richard Lewisohn was born on July 12, 1875 and received his medical education at the University of Freiburg (8). Dr. Lewisohn made many contributions to medicine during his long career, primarily at New York’s Mt. Sinai Hospital. His most well-known contribution is the introduction of the modern technique of blood transfusion (8). In 1947, Dr. Lewisohn was experimenting with an anti-cancer drug, teropterin (9)(pteroltriglutamic acid). However, to this point all his research was performed on mice. He was working with various teropterins, all of which were extracted from brewer’s yeast. The particular preparation of the teropterin caused a wide variation in the effects seen on the mice (9). Dr. Lewisohn offered Ruth to receive this experimental therapy. Dr. Lewisohn was very honest with Ruth about his chances for a recovery although no formal informed consent was signed. Dr. Lewisohn told Ruth that receiving this drug probably would not help him and, in fact, might even make his condition worse. Ruth responded bravely that he would still like to go through with the experimental treatment in order to provide the medical community with information that might help individuals in the future with the same ailment. Thus, Ruth became a subject in one of the first clinical trials of an anti-cancer drug (10). Dr. Lewisohn’s experimental course of teropterin injections led to a dramatic, albeit short-lived, improvement in Ruth (11).

During Babe’s life he was dedicated to helping and providing comfort to the most vulnerable and forgotten individuals of society. He always had time for children—particularly, very ill children. Throughout his life Ruth would make countless visits to hospitals and orphanages around the world. On his visits to the hospitals, usually accompanied by his daughter Dorothy, Babe would make sure that the first to be brought to see him would be the most ill because he knew that they would not live long enough to experience the joy of meeting him at the ballpark. Babe fought a valiant two year battle against his own cancer. During this period he suffered tremendously and knew that his own death was near. Yet, the teachings which were instilled in him at St. Mary’s remained with him and Ruth selflessly continued his humanitarian mission. Cancer patients today directly benefit from the information researchers gathered from his case. Babe’s wish came true— he is helping individuals with cancer today.

Babe’s humanitarian mission did not end at 8:01pm on August 16, 1948 when Ruth passed away. Rather, his only biological daughter, Dorothy Ruth Pirone, carried on his humanitarian work until her own passing when she passed the torch to her daughter, Linda Ruth Tosetti, who continues to inspire individuals today with the Ruthian humanitarian message.

References

2. Personal e-mail correspondence between Linda Ruth Tosetti and William James Maloney; January 12, 2011.
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