John Punnett Peters, Medical Scientist

John P. Peters was one of the foremost medical scientists of his generation, a man of selfless rectitude who never spared himself and who played as energetically as he worked. He believed in the equality of all men and in their basic rights in society, and, in the face of any seeming injustice, he never hesitated to voice his opinions.

Branded some years ago as a subversive by unsolicited "informers," he eventually took his case, at great expense to himself, to the highest court in the land and was exonerated. At a memorial service, held on 3 January in the Yale Medical Library, Fowler V. Harper pointed out that a 17th-century ancestor of Dr. Peters, one Andrew Peters, had protested against the witch trials at the Salem assizes and that the Peters family had been protesting about witch hunts ever since.

Born on 4 December 1887, the son of Reverend John P. Peters, rector of St. Michael's Episcopal Church, New York, and Gabriella Brooks Forman, John Peters received his early education at Trinity School in New York (1896–1900) and was later sent, in the hope of subduing his rather tempestuous nature, to St. John's School at Manlius, a New York military academy (1900–04), from which he was eventually graduated as "top boy" with distinction in English and the classics.

After taking his A.B. degree at Yale in 1908, he taught English and Latin for a year at Manlius to obtain funds to enable him to enter medical school, which he did the following year at the College of Physicians and Surgeons, New York, where he took his M.D. degree in 1913. After serving as house officer at the Presbyterian Hospital 1913–15), he became captain in the U.S. Army Medical Corps (1917) and saw action in World War I as chief of medical service of the U.S. Base Hospital No. 2 (Presbyterian), which took over British General Hospital No. 1 at Etretat (1918–19).

His academic advancement was rapid; he first became Coolidge fellow and instructor in clinical medicine (1915–17) and assistant physician, Presbyterian Hospital (1916–17), fellow of the Russell Sage Institute of Pathology (1919–20), instructor in clinical medicine at Cornell University and, at the same time, adjunct visiting physician at Bellevue Hospital (1919–20). He was called to Vanderbilt University as associate professor of medicine (1920–21) but spent the year at the Rockefeller Institute in New York, where he worked on problems of clinical chemistry with Donald D. Van Slyke. In 1921 he came to Yale University with his close friend, Francis G. Blake, as associate professor of medicine and associate physician at the New Haven Hospital, with Blake as professor and head of the department; in 1927 he succeeded George Blumer as John Slade Ely professor of medicine, a post that he held until his death at the age of 68. Dr. Peters would have retired in June 1956.

Peters was a man of many interests, professional and other. His first scientific publication, "Carbon dioxide acidosis, the cause of cardiac dyspnea," was published in the *American Journal of Physiology* [**43**, 113 (1917)], while he was serving as Coolidge fellow at the College of Physicians and Surgeons. This was followed by more than 200 articles in various medical and biochemical journals on general problems of electrolyte and acid-base equilibrium, chemistry, and metabolic disturbances in various diseases, especially diabetes, nephritis, nutritional and endocrine disorders, and studies of transfer of water in the body.

In recent years he published a number of papers in the lay and medical press on the improvement of medical care in the United States. In 1931 and 1932 appeared a two-volume work, *Quantitative Clinical Chemistry,* written in collaboration with Van Slyke. At the time of Peters' death, they were preparing a new edition of this monumental work. Well known also was his short monograph entitled, *Body Water; the Exchange of Fluids in Man.* Thus, his scientific interest was always in the application and integration of quantitative chemical methods to the clinical problems of disease.

His chief interest in recent years was in medical economics, especially the cost of medical care, and he served (1937–49) as secretary of the committee of (400) physicians that urged nationalization of health services in the United States. The members of this committee felt that the American Medical Association, as an organization, had incurred the distrust of the public because of its stand in opposition and that lay bodies interested in social questions were pressing the government to impose some program for medical care without the expert advice of physicians. They therefore devised a set of principles and proposals—generalizations that seemed to represent approximately the consensus of their opinions concerning the policies that should be adopted by the medical profession to assure the best progress of medicine in the interests of the public.

A committee was formed to promulgate these resolutions and to gain the support of the members of the medical profession for them. The outstanding aim of the committee was to bring the medical profession itself to take the initiative in public service in its own field. The principles and proposals received considerable publicity and at least stirred up healthy discussion throughout the medical world.

Dr. Peters followed his avocations with as much zest for life as he did his professional and outside interests. In *Who's Who* he listed his hobbies as "piano, tennis, squash, sociology, and roses," and each one might have occupied his time fully. Everything about him was elastic except his stomach (he always ate lightly) and his conscience.

He was an ardent disciple of full-time medicine, and at no time in his entire career did he accept a fee for his services; any voluntary contributions from patients were used to support his research. Best known professionally as a biochemist, Dr. Peters took great pride in his work as a practicing doctor. As attending physician at the New Haven Hospital since 1921, he made rounds daily.

JOHN F. FULTON
Department of the History of Medicine, Yale University Medical School, New Haven, Connecticut

No great law in Natural Philosophy has ever been discovered for its practical applications, but the instances are innumerable of investigations apparently useless in the narrow sense of the word which have led to the most valuable results.—LORD KELVIN.