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John B. West

Breathing on the Roof of the World

Memoir of a Respiratory Physiologist

 Springer

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ISSN 2365-0613
Springer Biographies
ISBN 978-1-4939-7121-3
DOI 10.1007/978-1-4939-7122-0

ISSN 2365-0621 (electronic)
ISBN 978-1-4939-7122-0 (eBook)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2017942788

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Cover illustration: Dr. John B. West (Front cover), Dr. Eugene Braunwald (Back cover, top), and Dr. Hermann Rahn (Back cover, bottom)

Printed on acid-free paper

This Springer imprint is published by Springer Nature
The registered company is Springer Science+Business Media LLC
The registered company address is: 233 Spring Street, New York, NY 10013, U.S.A.

Preface



As is clear from the first chapter, I began this Memoir for members of my family, particularly my children and grandchildren. However, as it developed, it occurred to me that it might be of interest to a larger community. I have been fortunate in having had an unusual career. Also, as noted in Chap. 1, I was influenced by recently reading biographies of two medical scientists with whom I previously worked, Charles Fletcher and Archibald Cochrane. I then realized that I was sadly ignorant about so much that was going on in their lives that was related to their research. The result was that I now have a much clearer understanding of their work. Scientific papers are essential of course, but so much else happens that is never related in this medium. I have tried to fill in some of this material here.

The result is this Memoir. The narrative occupies 11 chapters that are amply illustrated with photographs. Many of these deal with my two Himalayan

expeditions that I was fortunate to take part in. There are also footnotes to flesh out some of the details in the narrative. This part should be accessible, and hopefully interesting, to many people who do not have a scientific background.

Additional online material is directed at physiologists and others in the academic community who have an interest in respiration and high altitude science. It includes a section that is a commentary on what I think are the most significant scientific contributions. To do this, I have selected a number of articles and included their abstracts that summarize the science and then added comments that hopefully explain why the study is important. I hope that this strategy will make the Memoir useful and interesting to a larger number of people.

I should say something for North American readers about the education process in Australia. This is actually similar to that in the UK and Europe but will be foreign to some US and Canadian readers. The high school that I attended reached a very high level in science in the last 2 years, although as a result, my education was regrettably very narrow. For example in these last 2 years, my subjects were mathematics I, mathematics II, physics, chemistry and, mercifully, English. This last was the only leaven in this otherwise very nerdy selection. As an example of the high level of teaching, the mathematics included substantial advanced calculus.

From high school I moved straight into the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Adelaide. The medical course lasted 6 years followed by the required 1 year of residency. However, I completely missed the college experience that all North American students are exposed to. I regret this. Our children, who were both born in the USA, went to college of course, and I became very aware of the advantages of this broad education. I think this system is superior to the one I was exposed to, although of course it is expensive. Incidentally, some of the medical schools in Australia and the UK are now moving to a pattern more like that of the USA.

Another disadvantage of my education is that I was only 17 years old when I entered medical school. This is far too young. I now teach first-year medical students who are about 22 years old. These 4 or 5 years make an enormous difference at that age, and the students are far more mature and receptive than I was. Remarkably, I was only 23 when I received my medical degree, and a year later I was qualified to remove your appendix if you were brave enough to let me.

Many people have helped with this Memoir. Amy Clay produced an early draft 14 years ago. Lisa Richter has been invaluable with the present text, and Zhenxing Fu has been indefatigable with the figures. My wife, Penelope, has been a continual tower of strength. I am greatly indebted to all.

La Jolla, CA, USA

John B. West

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