

IPHA History

In honor of Dr. Walter L. Bierring 1868-1961

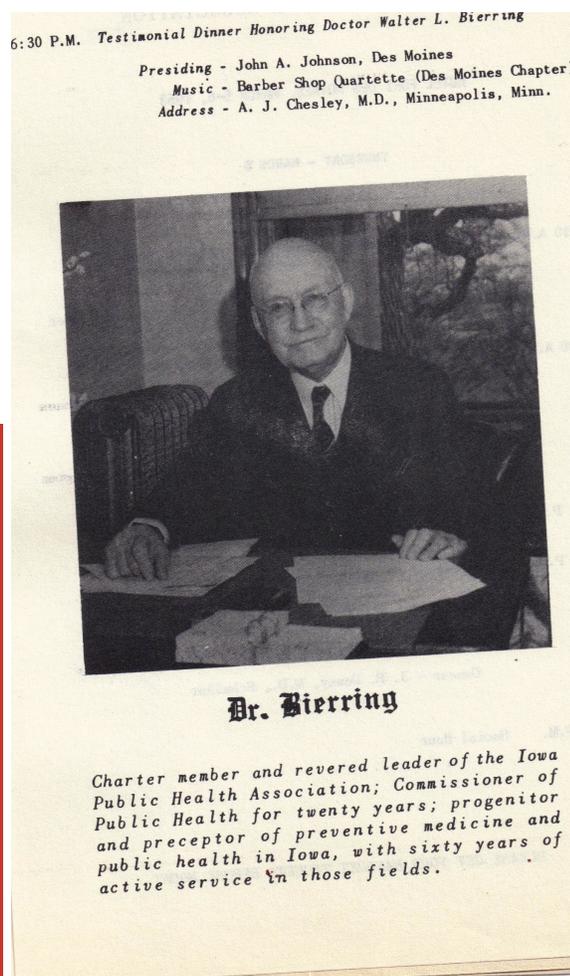
By Dr. Ronald Eckoff

On March 5, 1953, as a part of the Annual Meeting of the Iowa Public Health Association, there was a "Testimonial Dinner Honoring Doctor Walter L. Bierring". The citation said: "Charter member and revered leader of the Iowa Public Health Association; Commissioner of Public Health for twenty years; progenitor and preceptor of preventive medicine and public health in Iowa, with sixty years of active service in those fields." (Dr. Bierring served as a Division Director for another eight years after this dinner.)

Walter Lawrence Bierring was born in Davenport, Iowa on July 15, 1868, of Danish descent. His father and mother, Jeppe and Elizabeth (Jessen) Bierring came to Davenport directly after their marriage in Denmark in the spring of 1866. Walter's parents, after a seafaring experience of

sixteen years were induced to settle inland, as far away from the sea as possible.

Walter's mother insisted that he learn German in addition to Danish and English. In later years he put his knowledge of that language to good use when he studied at German universities. An injury to his foot and leg in a railroad accident interfered with his preliminary education and brought him in contact with outstanding physicians of that period. He entered the medical department in the State University of Iowa in September 1889 and was granted the degree of Doctor of Medicine on March 9, 1892. Soon after graduation he sailed for Europe to begin two years postgraduate studies at the Universities of Heidelberg and Vienna. In April 1892 he was advised of his appointment as the first chair of the Department of Pathology and Bacteriology at his alma mater, effective in September 1893, which shortened his European studies. After teaching one school year, he entered the Pasteur Institute, Paris, in April 1894, remaining until September. In 1894-95 he prepared the first diphtheria antitoxin produced in the United States west of New York City. After testing it on himself, Dr. Bierring used it to successfully treat more than 300 cases of diphtheria over the next five years. Following the close of the medical school term in the years 1895-1900 he conducted the Pasteur course in practical bacteriology from four to six weeks each. In 1896 he spent six months in graduate study in European medical centers, and in 1901 after the destruction of the medical building in March; he was directed to go to Europe to obtain plans for the new medical laboratory buildings to be constructed and to purchase the necessary equipment and anatomical specimens for a new pathology museum.



IPHA History: Dr. Bierring continued...

Dr. Bierring continued to press for improved understanding of bacteriology in Iowa. With the background of his extensive work with diphtheria and typhoid fever he lobbied for the creation of a state funded laboratory, fully equipped to study, identify, and treat bacteria-caused diseases. His efforts were rewarded in 1904 with the establishment of the Bacteriological Laboratory of the State Board of Health in Iowa City, known today as the University Hygienic laboratory. The first director was Dr. Henry Albert, who later served as Commissioner of Health.

In 1903 Dr. Bierring became professor of the theory and practice of medicine and chair of the Department of Internal Medicine. When Abraham Flexner reviewed the State University of Iowa's College of Medicine in 1909, he recommended the college focus on instruction in basic sciences and abandon clinical instruction since the number of patients was too few and the hospital too small to provide first class medical education. Dr. Bierring defended the college, arguing that the students saw more than 10 clinical cases per week in the hospital and additional cases in his recently opened outpatient dispensary. Flexner also raised the question of physicians using hospital facilities to treat private patients. Flexner saw this as unethical and urged the faculty be paid entirely by the college. Bierring saw this as unreasonable and resigned his chair in April 1910 rather than abandoning his private practice. In 1910 Dr. Bierring became chair of medicine at Drake University School of Medicine, Des Moines, continuing until the school was merged with the State University of Iowa Medical School in 1914. Dr. Bierring remained in Des Moines to continue a consultation practice in internal medicine.

Dr. Bierring served as contract surgeon in World War I and as a member of special examining boards of heart and lung diseases at Fort Des Moines, Camp Dodge, Fort Riley, and Fort Oglethorpe.

President of the Iowa State Board of Health and Iowa Board of Medical Examiners
1914-1925

Founding member and secretary/treasurer of the Federation of State Medical Boards (FSMB) The FSMB did not have a staff and much of the organization's work took place in Dr. Bierring's home. He was the editor of the quarterly or monthly publication (various names) of the FSMB from 1915-1960.

Worked on setting up the National Board of Medical Examiners in 1915 and served as its president.

Dr. Bierring played a prominent role in the organization of the American Board of Internal Medicine in 1936. He was the first chairman and held certificate No. 1.

Helped form the American Board of Preventive Medicine and Public Health in 1947 and held certificate No 1.

President of the Johnson County Medical Society 1904

President of the Polk County Medical Society 1912

President of the Iowa Medical Society 1908

President of the American Medical Association 1934

Received Distinguished Service Award from the American Medical Association in 1956

Member of the Board of Regents of the American College of Physicians

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President of Alpha Omega Alpha Honorary Medical Society and traveled throughout the United States to establish new chapters. Editor of its journal "The Pharos" at the time of his death.

The last nine years of his life he was a consultant in internal medicine at the Veterans Administration Hospital in Des Moines.

Iowa Commissioner of Health 1933-1953

IPHA History: Dr. Bierring continued...

Director of the Division of Gerontology, Heart and Chronic Disease of the Iowa Department of Public Health 1953-1961

First President of the Middle States Public Health Association in 1949. The group disbanded in 1968.

Editor of the Fifth through the Ninth Editions of "Rypins' Medical Licensure Examinations". (1945-1960) This is the book of topical summaries and questions to help prepare for medical licensure examinations.

Co-Author with Morris Fishbein, of the History of the American Medical Association 1847-1947

Author of "A History of the Department of Internal Medicine, State University of Iowa College of Medicine 1870-1958."

Chair of the Historical Committee of the Iowa Medical Society that wrote and published: "One Hundred Years of Iowa Medicine; Commemorating the Centenary of the Iowa Medical Society 1850-1950". Dr. Bierring wrote several of the chapters.

Author of "History (1880-1960) Iowa State Department of Health." (Copy posted in the history section of IPHA website)

The University of Iowa has the Walter L. Bierring Professor of Clinical Education.

The University of Iowa has the Walter Bierring Award for the outstanding medical student in microbiology.

Iowa Methodist Hospital (Unity Point) has the Bierring Dining Room.

The Iowa Medical Society has the Bierring Board Room.

The American Lung Association of Iowa used to have the Walter Bierring Award.

Should the Iowa Public Health Association establish a Walter Bierring Award?

As a small world note: It is possible Dr. Bierring had a hand in my being in Iowa. In July 1961 Dr. Jason Lipkind was assigned by the US Public Health Service to Iowa as a Heart Disease Control Officer. It is my understanding the plan was for him to work with Dr. Bierring, who was the Director of the Division of Gerontology, Heart Disease and Chronic Illness. Unfortunately Dr. Bierring died June 24, 1961. Dr. Jack Penhollow followed as the 2nd Heart Disease Control Officer assigned to the Iowa Department of Public Health 1963-5. I was the 3rd (and last) Heart Disease Control Officer 1965-7.

Major sources: "One Hundred Years of Iowa Medicine"; "The Biographical Dictionary of Iowa-The University of Iowa"; Federation of State Medical Boards Centennial Celebration 1912-2012; Obituary in the August 12, 1961 British Medical Journal.

