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Celebrating Black History

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try that was black-owned, operated and managed, and the first racially integrated hospital in the city as well as the first hospital for black women in the United States.

He employed African-American and white doctors and emphasized the need to provide the best available care for everyone, requiring doctors at the hospital to keep abreast of the latest advances in medicine. The hospital had a phenomenal 87 percent success rate, especially considering the financial and health conditions of most patients and the primitive conditions of most hospitals.

It was here in 1898 that a man was brought in with a stab wound to the chest. Dr. Williams operated on the man, stitching up the heart itself and thus becoming the first person to ever perform open heart surgery. This was almost unheard of at the time, as entrance into the chest or abdomen of a patient would almost surely bring resulting infection and death.

Not only was Dr. Williams the first surgeon to perform open heart surgery, he was the first to

open the chest cavity successfully without the patient dying of infection. If he failed his reputation as a doctor could be ruined. He was not looking for fame or trying to do something new and special, he just did what he could to save the man's life.

The surgery was tedious and dangerous. A month later the patient was opened up again to remove fluid. Fifty one days later, he recovered and went home to live for another 50 years. Similar procedures had been performed in the early 19th century by Francesco Romero, a Spanish surgeon and by Napoleon's physician, Dominique-Jean Larrey, but Dr. Williams is credited with the first fully successful open heart surgery.

Newspaper headlines reported: "Sewed Up His Heart! Remarkable Surgical Operation on a Colored Man."

In 1894, at the request of President Grover Cleveland, Dr. Williams became Surgeon in Chief at the Freedmen's Hospital in Washington D.C. and organized different departments to treat a variety of illnesses.

In 1913 he was the only African-American in a group of charter members of the Amer-

ican College of Surgeons. The American Medical Association refused to accept black members and so he helped to develop his own organization. An interesting sidelight is that he was honored in the Stevie Wonder song "Black Man" from the album "Songs in the Key of Life."

Dr. Williams encouraged African-American leaders to open hospitals in cities where African-Americans would receive first rate care. He received numerous honors and was the first black physician named as a Fellow in the American College of Surgeons. He died on Aug. 4, 1931.

I first learned about Dr. Williams when I was in high school. Later at the age of 26, I was first assistant to a heart surgeon who opened a boy's heart in an emergency circumstance. As I held the moving heart in my hands, a memory and kinesthetic experience that will never leave me, rekindled my thoughts of Dr. Williams.

Dr. Ronald Turco is a physician from Portland and an author of articles on black history topics such as the jazz era and civil rights.



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