The Children's Doctor

Dr. Bela Schick's Work Helped Millions

By Sue De Pasquale

With his black mustache, twinkling blue eyes and Old World charm, pediatrician Bela Schick could put at ease even the shyest of his young patients. The office of his private practice in New York City was filled with dolls and toys he'd acquired from travels all over the world; a piano sat tucked in the corner.

Before ever taking out his stethoscope, the Hungarian-born doctor would noodle on the keys, offer a toy—even get down on the floor—all in an effort to relax his small charges. "The child," Schick was fond of saying, "has more right than science."

A surprising sentiment, perhaps, from a man whose medical research helped eradicate diphtheria—a deadly disease that, in the early part of the 1900s, annually claimed the lives of thousands of children all over the world. Considered the leading pediatrician of his day (he once estimated he'd treated 1 million children over the course of his career), Bela Schick also made important contributions to the understanding of tuberculosis, scarlet fever and infant nutrition and helped lay the groundwork for the field of immunology.

Born July 16, 1877, in Boglar, Hungary, young Schick convinced his father to allow him to attend medical school and pursue pediatrics—rather than enter the family grain business—by quoting the Talmud: "The world is kept alive by the breath of children."

After earning his M.D. at Karl Franz University in Graz, Austria, he started a medical practice and joined the medical faculty at the University of Vienna. It was there, in 1905, that he and colleague Clemens von Pirquet first described the concept and treatment of allergy—known until then as "serum sickness"—based on the body's antigen-antibody response.

Building on this work, Schick in 1913 devised a simple method for finding out who was most vulnerable to diphtheria. Known as the "Schick Test," it involved injecting patients

with a diluted form of the diphtheria toxin. Those who had previously been exposed to the disease and developed immunity had no response. In patients who hadn't been exposed, the injected spot would turn red and swollen. Doctors then knew to administer an anti-toxin—a horse serum best given only when necessary due to potentially problematic side effects.

The "Schick Test" was widely used throughout the ensuing decade until, in 1923, scientists developed an anti-toxin with fewer side effects that could be given safely to all babies during their first year. Schick was a leader in the massive public health campaign to get children vaccinated against the disease.

It was also in 1923 that Schick left Vienna for the United States, where he became pediatrician-in-chief at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York City. His wit and warmth quickly earned him the respect of patients, colleagues and medical students alike at Mount Sinai and other academic medical centers where he maintained an affiliation, including Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons.

"Language was never a barrier, for Schick had a surpassing ability to make himself understood. If English did not suit his needs, German would; if his audience included children, pantomime would accompany the words," remarked Dr. Howard Rapaport, who was a resident physician under Schick at Mount Sinai, and a longtime collaborator in allergy research, in the book *Aphorisms and Facetiae of Bela Schick*.

Rapaport and others noted that Bela Schick was a man with ideas ahead of his time—in many different realms. By extending opportunities for promising female physicians, Schick helped Mount Sinai become a training ground for women who would go on to pioneering careers in medicine.

As a pediatrician, he advocated the idea of newborns "rooming in" with their mothers in the hospital, long before the concept came into vogue. In his popular 1932 guide to child rearing, *Child Care Today*, Schick argued against spanking and talked about the lasting effects that early trauma can have on children.

Among the group of physicians that founded the American Academy of Pediatrics, the giant of medicine received many honors for his work, including the Medal of the New York Academy of Medicine and the Addingham Gold Medal.

Schick and his wife, Catherine, never had children of their own. They spent their later years traveling the world, and it was on a cruise to South America that the gentle pediatrician became sick with pleurisy. He died at Mount Sinai Hospital on December 6, 1967.

"I am an optimist in my philosophy of life," Schick said near the end of his life, upon receiving an award from the American Jewish Congress. "Children are our future. The more I have studied the child, the more I have admired nature for accomplishing this miracle of creation."