

# Kenneth Blackfan

Kenneth Daniel Blackfan's medical career spanned several disciplines. After initially working as a bacteriologist in Albany immediately after graduating medical school, he joined his father in general practice in New York. Blackfan subsequently underwent pediatric residency training at three different hospitals:

(1) The St. Vincents Foundling Hospital in Philadelphia, (2) Washington University in St. Louis, and (3) Johns Hopkins Hospital.

He subsequently was appointed Chairman of the Department of Pediatrics at the University of Cincinnati from where he moved on to become Chairman of the Department of Pediatrics at Boston Children's Hospital and Thomas Morgan Rotch Professor of Pediatrics at Harvard Medical School.

A common theme throughout Blackfan's career was his acumen for scientific research and its application to the practice of pediatrics. From his work on the clinical detection of thrombosis of the cerebral venous sinuses to his legendary experiments on CSF flow, Blackfan's contributions to neurosurgery came at a time when neurosurgery was evolving into a specialty in itself. Also notable are his personal friendships with Walter Dandy and Harvey Cushing, the two leading neurosurgeons of his era.

Blackfan's adult life was marred by disabling tic douloureux throughout his tenure as Chairman at Boston Children's Hospital, though he seldom mentioned it to anyone. He was convinced by friend and associate, Walter Dandy, to undergo surgery to relieve his trigeminal neuralgia. This operation performed at Hopkins by Dandy himself resulted in severe complications of an anesthetic face, tongue, and eye on one side, resulting in significant disability, although he would rarely complain. Sadly, Blackfan's final years of his life were complicated by systemic neoplastic disease resulting from lung cancer. He was forced to take a sabbatical year in 1941 to relieve him from administrative and clinical duties due to his prolonged illness. Blackfan died at age 58, on November 29, 1941 in Louisville, Kentucky, one week before the attack on Pearl Harbor <sup>1)</sup>

1)

Jeelani Y, Cohen AR. The Gentle Giant: Kenneth Daniel Blackfan and his contributions to pediatric neurosurgery. Childs Nerv Syst. 2015 Jun;31(6):821-31. doi: 10.1007/s00381-015-2658-x. Epub 2015 Feb 27. PubMed PMID: 25722048.

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