Johnny R. Porter, PhD: Biographical Narrative

Professor Emeritus of Physiology, Medicine, Pharmacology, and Neuroscience, LSUHSC 1973-2010
Retired Adjunct Professor of Physiology Tulane Physiology; circa 1990’s-2010
Retired Professor of Biomedical Sciences (Physiology) William Carey College of Osteopathic Medicine (COM) 2010-2015

Early life and education written from Dr. Porter’s recollection of his early childhood and young adult years:

Early life:
I grew up as a child in Union Parish (community of Shiloh; close to Bernice LA), a very economically deprived parish in North Central Louisiana. My father, John T. Porter, was a farmer until I was seven years old. My Dad only had a high school education. My mother, Betty Porter, was a housewife and helper with the crops until we moved a short distance from the farm to Claiborne parish. My, grandfather, grandmother aunts, uncles and cousins all lived in close proximity to these locations and all of them provided a wonderful family interaction for my early development and carefree childhood. My Mother only had an eighth grade education and most all of her family members were from Arkansas. We would visit those relatives in the summer and sometimes during holidays (early trips were in a model A Ford). I have one Sister, Sharon, who is still alive today and lives in Dixon Ky. We were underprivileged in an economic sense but we were a very happy family simply because we did not realize we were poor. My sister and I still have remnants of 80 acres of land on the old family farm where we grew up (See Figures 1, 2, & 3 below). The early relatives of the Porter family settled on that land in 1847, coming over from Georgia in covered wagons. My dad started working for a natural gas company, Texas Gas Transmission, corporation in 1951(Claiborne Parish) and after further moves to Ouachita Parish, Texas Gas finally relocated our family to Owensboro KY in 1958-59. This was quite a change for me, a lad brought up in the deep South. I was starting the 10th grade in Daviess County high school in Owensboro KY. I had capable teachers at this public school.

Education and college years from BS to Ph.D.:
After graduation from high school (1962), I attended Western KY University in Bowling Green KY. I had excellent biology and even physiology teachers at this school. Dr. Don Bailey was my physiology teacher (we used the early edition of Dr. Guyton’s textbook). I was also Dr. Bailey’s student grader. Dr. William Norris was my teacher in comparative anatomy and embryology. He was one of the best instructors that I have ever had in my entire educational career. Dr. Norris left before my senior year at Western KY and moved to the University of Louisiana at Monroe in 1965. I followed him there after graduation from Western KY and received my MS in biology under his direction in 1968. They paid me to go to school!!! I had wonderful instructors in Monroe and my thesis study was focused on endocrine physiology, specifically the pineal gland regulation of the reproductive system. One of the most important events of my life
transpired in Monroe. I met and eventually married my sweet wife (of 48 and almost 49 years) Terry. From that marriage we have procreated 3 very beautiful and talented children, Tricia, Julie, and John. There are roughly 8-year intervals between each of our children. We have 3 of the most beautiful and handsome grandchildren two boys (16 and 11) and a princess for a grand daughter (7).

At the end of my MS study in Monroe in 1968, I met the graduate coordinator, Dr. Raymond Russell, from LSU Medical School. He was attending the LA Academy of Sciences Meeting in the spring of 1968 and he heard me speak. LSU Medical School was a relatively new graduate school at the time and I accepted a graduate stipend to go to graduate school at the medical school in New Orleans (Paid again!!). Sidney Harris was the Chair of the physiology department and a nationally recognized investigator in the area of cardiovascular research. Much of his work dealt with coronary blood flow and myocardial ischemia. The department had recently hired several young faculty members. One of these faculty members was my major professor, Dr. Mary Coyne. Dr. Coyne, a graduate of Wellesley college in Massachusetts, had trained with Dr. Julian Kitay (a Harvard MD) in endocrinology at the University of Virginia. Biochemistry also had Dr. Paul Hyde, a well know steroid biochemist from Saint Louis University, that was also a very important part of my Ph.D. training in endocrine physiology. New Orleans was a hotbed of endocrinology during my graduate career. Tulane and the VA hospital had Andrew Schally, Abba Kastin, and A.K. Arimura. LSU medicine and endocrinology had William Blackard, an expert in GH control. Dr. Coyne collaborated with many of these investigators. Our work was focused on understanding the regulatory inputs that controlled hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal secretions. We had NIH funding for this work. The Nobel Prize eventually came to Dr. Schally in 1977 for his work on hypothalamic releasing hormones. I received my Ph.D. in physiology in 1973. The year before (1972) Dr. Coyne and husband John, a surgical resident at Charity Hospital, moved back to Boston. Dr. Harris retired and John Spitzer came to be our new department head of physiology. He hired me as an instructor to immediately fill the void in neuroendocrine physiology. Many of the faculty of Harris’s department were retiring and moving on so it was lucky for me that a new department and scientific environment came to me instead of vice versa. I was fortunate. I do not recommend staying at the place where one receives one’s degree, but for me it worked out in a magnificent way. Dr. John Spitzer was absolutely one of the finest physiologist and mentors that a young budding endocrinologist could wish to have. Dr. Spitzer encouraged me and gave me release time after teaching to go to the VA hospital and work with Dr. Abba Kastin. Dr. Schally and Arimura would pass through the lab and say hello to me and to my tag along graduate students.

**Professional Career:**

**LSUHSC**

To reiterate, Dr. Porter received his Bachelor Degree in Biology and Chemistry from Western Ky. University (WKU) in 1966. He received a Master’s Degree in Biology under Dr. William Norris’s direction in 1968. Dr. Porter finally received his PhD with Dr. Mary Coyne, a physiological neuroendocrinologist at Louisiana State University Medical
Dr. Porter progressed through the academic ranks at LSUHSC from Instructor of physiology in 1973 to Full Professor of Physiology and Medicine. He was also made Full Professor of Medicine, Pharmacology and Neuroscience in the early to mid 1990’s at LSUHSC and Adjunct Professor of Physiology at Tulane Medical School during this same time frame. Dr. Porter was appointed Professor Emeritus of Physiology at the LSUHSC in 2010 upon his retirement and still holds that distinction.

Dr. Porter taught physiology courses in nursing, dentistry, dental hygiene, medicine, and graduate physiology during his career at LSUHSC. Likewise he has taught several disciplines of physiology and he has been physiology course director for Nursing, Medicine, Graduate Endocrinology, Dental Physiology, Dental Hygiene Physiology, a Special Topics in Oral Physiology and others. Dr. Porter was also asked to be an adjunct professor of physiology at Tulane Medical School by Dr. Navar. In this position he has taught summer endocrine classes at Tulane Medical School and he has also taught endocrine control lectures in biomedical engineering on the main Campus of Tulane.

In his research career, he has been the mentor to students at all levels as they have trained in his research laboratory. Dr. Porter has personally served as major professor of numerous Ph.D. and Master’s students. In addition, he has served on over 53 Graduate Committees at LSUHSC. He has also mentored several Post-doctoral and resident fellows in medicine and dentistry and over 60 high school students, medical students, dental student and various other student volunteers in his laboratory during his career at LSUHSC. My department of medicine endocrine section colleagues Frank Svec (Director) and Chandan Prasad were involved in many of our wonderful studies in obesity and diabetes.

Dr. Porter has always been active in investigation of regulation of the hypothalamic pituitary adrenal axis as his research interest since graduate school. In recent years this research interest has been focused on the abnormal regulation of this neuroendocrine axis in obesity and food intake. Most recently he has been interested in the adrenal steroid, dehydroepiandrosterone (DHEA). This steroid is also produced by neurons in the brain as well as the adrenal gland and it is thus classified as a true neurosteroid. He has worked for 25 years with an obese rodent model, the obese Zucker rat. This animal model is an excellent model of human youth onset obesity. This model emulates the abnormal neuroendocrine regulation downstream of leptin insensitivity in humans. This research has resulted in two invitations for plenary lectures at international congresses one the International congress of steroids in Fukuoka Japan and the International Society of Neuropsychiatry in Cancun Mexico. Most recently he has also been invited to give the prestigious Lancaster-Puckett lecture at his alma mater, Western Ky. University, 44 years post baccalaureate. The NIH, the American Heart Association, and the American Diabetes Association have funded this research. Work on the neuroendocrine control of the hypothalamic pituitary adrenal axis as it relates to premature labor also led to the funding of a National March of Dimes (MOD) Grant awarded for the 2006-2010 grant cycle. This grant was one of 6 grants awarded nationally during this grant cycle.

Dr. Porter also served in administration at LSUHSC during his academic career. He served on school and university committees such as admissions, accreditation,
graduate committees, faculty promotion and tenure, IACUC (original committee), curriculum, academic performance, faculty and dean search committees. He was also president of faculty assemblies, president of faculty senate of LSUHSC (six schools) and elected as a faculty representative to the LSU board of supervisors group and the entire state of the board of regents (all Louisiana Universities). It was my feeling that it was the job of a tenured faculty member at academic medical centers to be involved in all three areas of academic work; i.e. teaching, research, and administration. I did my best to participate in all three in a balanced fashion.

William Carey College of Osteopathic Medicine (Recollections of staring a new school from ground zero)

Dr. Porter joined William Carey University College of Osteopathic Medicine (WCUCOM) in 2010 (after retiring from LSUHSC) as Professor of Physiology. At this point in his career, Dr. Porter gave up his active research laboratory and began what was a most interesting job at William Carey University College of Osteopathic Medicine. In 2010 and even before that date plans were underway to start up a new Osteopathic medical school in the relatively small town of Hattiesburg MS from scratch! I joined several Colleagues from LSUHSC and met several new Colleagues from South Carolina, to South Fla. to the University of Southern Mississippi and other osteopathic schools to begin this journey. There were many obstacles in starting a new school (committees, catalogs, accreditation to name a few) but we succeeded in putting this school on a great foundation for the future. My main job was to teach physiology and neuroscience to preclinical medical students. I excitedly embraced teaching renal, gastrointestinal, endocrine, and neuroscience. In addition I taught electrocardiography. We also had plenty of work to do on committees outside the classroom! Because of my administrative experience, I was asked to serve on admissions, promotion and tenure for faculty, promotion and matriculation for students, and several other committees related to a startup medical school. In my second year at Carey I submitted an application to be on the national Commission of Osteopathic College Accreditation (COCA) and was trained to be a pre-clinical evaluator for Osteopathic medical schools.

Osteopathic medical school training is similar in the 1st 2 years to allopathic medical school training with one exception. In the first two years students are provided training in Osteopathic Manipulative Medicine (OMM). This subject is taught in the curriculum 1 day a week. This day is set aside for the laboratory and clinical didactic lectures for OMM. A real attempt is made to educate and emphasize to OMM students that the whole person (physiology) is made up of body, mind, and spirit. Osteopathic medical students are trained to approach the patient with emphasis on the whole person. What an experience! Many times in the early going I felt like we were putting out one fire after another however, the students made it all worthwhile.

I retired from WCUCOM in August of 2015. The school is now fully accredited and we have graduated two classes. Many of our students are now in very successful residencies in all of the areas of medicine. I am going to give a few lectures at the WCUCOM this spring as an adjunct and I will continue to go on site visits for COCA in accrediting other Osteopathic schools. It is interesting to note that these schools have rapidly expanded in number of locations since the late nineties. This should provide
more jobs in teaching for physiologist who may be more interested in education than research. This is not to say that many campuses of osteopathic medical schools are not involved in medical and osteopathic research. Many campus locations are very involved in research and one day William Carey will be as well. First things first! I have had a wonderful career as a physiologist. I have served on several committees in the physiology society. I have had many wonderful colleagues in New Orleans, Hattiesburg, across the Nation and Internationally as well. I would be nothing without the wonderful students I have taught in professional school and especially my graduate students who have gone on to great careers in research, in industry, and in academics. I am indeed a lucky man and it is my wish that our wonderful society of physiologist will be around for years to come. Physiology embraces function from the genome to the whole animal. It is medicine and pathophysiology is disease. Disease is nothing more than a physiologic open loop disturbance of homeostasis.

I am enjoying my retired life. I am attending to many “Honey do’s “ that were neglected during my 1hr and 40 minute sojourn from Metairie LA to Hattiesburg MS on Monday morning. I quote my wife Terry who says “He had his academic mid-life crisis in Hattiesburg MS”.

Figure 1 is a photograph of my grandparent’s home in Union Parish LA where Dr. Porter was born in 1944. The room to the left is where Dr. Porter was born.
Figure 2 shows the foundation remnants of the small house that Dr. Porter grew up in as a child. His father and relatives built this house. The chimney is visible in the right background. It was across the road from his grandparent’s house Figure 1.

Figure 3 is showing Dr. Porter with his two grandsons in front of the old family barn in Union Parish LA. This barn was built by family and relatives circa early 1900.