How I Became Interested in Nuclear Medicine

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I have been at Washington University (WU) since I began there as an undergraduate in 1962. Although I did not become interested in nuclear medicine until I was in medical school, I had my first contact with nuclear science in the summer after my sophomore year, when I worked in the WU Radiochemistry Building, a truly historic facility that included a cyclotron installed in the 1940s for the production of short-lived radioisotopes for medical use (also was used to produce plutonium for the Manhattan Project). I worked that summer for Dr. Arthur Wahl, a professor of chemistry, a former graduate student of Glenn Seaborg at UC Berkeley and a co-discoverer of plutonium. My job that summer was unrelated chemistry laboratory work; only several years later did I realize its significance to my career choice.

During the preclinical years in medical school, I was tilting towards hematology, which I found so intriguing during our pathophysiology course. My decision to pursue a career in nuclear instead was entirely serendipitous. In 1967, at the end of my sophomore year, I needed to select a 6-week elective to finish off the year. Most of my classmates opted to work in a basic science laboratory, but I was very eager to do something with direct clinical relevance. I had heard about an elective in cardiac radiology and tried to sign up for it but found that two of my classmates already had taken the available slots. The head of cardiac radiology suggested that I speak with a new faculty member, Dr. E. James Potchen, who was chief of nuclear medicine and was very eager to work with medical students. Jim Potchen, who is probably one of the smartest people I have ever met, created an elective that included clinical exposure to nuclear medicine and a laboratory experiment that resulted in my first scientific publication. From that point on, I was hooked on pursuing an academic career in radiology and nuclear medicine.

With Potchen as my mentor, I spent as much time as possible in nuclear medicine for the rest of medical school and then, after my internship year, started my residency training in radiology and nuclear medicine. In my final year of residency, Jim Potchen went on sabbatical and I took on much of the responsibility for running the nuclear medicine clinic. As it turned out that was very good training, because Jim Potchen decided not to return to WU from sabbatical. I was offered, and after much soul searching, accepted the position as the new chief of nuclear medicine (to begin the day after my residence ended). Nearly 47 years later, it seems like this was a pretty good decision! My fascination with nuclear medicine is just as strong today as it was then, offering a practice covering a broad spectrum of disease, combining biochemistry and physiology with anatomy, and providing many of the best attributes of both radiology and internal medicine. Since the rise of PET and, now, theranostics, the future of this specialty looks even brighter.