

Parenthood, Priesthood, and Practice

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Editors Note: *Latter-day Saint physicians face incredible pressures. They are simultaneously thrown into the roles of wise counselor, concerned parent, true friend, and dynamic leader. Families need their time. Patients want their time. Church service takes their time. The proper balance is, to say the least, difficult to keep. Unless handled properly, the demands can sap spiritual, physical, and mental strength. The following is a look at how several physicians/fathers face the challenge of stabilizing the three pillars of their lives—parenthood, priesthood, and practice.*

It has been said that medical marriages are at very high risk. What specifically do you do to help your marriage remain solid?

Durham: Toward the end of my medical school experience, a psychiatrist on the faculty held a meeting with the student association and their spouses and spoke to us about the “medical marriage.” He had asked his secretary to identify in his files those couples he had taken into counseling where one or both partners were physicians. Two hours later she returned and said, “I’m down to the E’s in the file and I have about sixty, how far do you want me to go?” He made the point that medical

marriages were at very high risk.

My professor was not speaking to a group of Latter-day Saints but his presentation has great relevance to any marriage. *Make your marriage the most important thing in your life.* He gave three simple suggestions for implementing that principle.

First—feelings are facts. He suggested that we not try to talk our spouses out of their feelings. He suggested that when we come home from work to find a spouse in tears, we not begin a litany of how blessed we are and how the bills are being paid and how healthy the children are. Rather, he suggested we might put our arm around our spouse and say, “You’ve had a hard day,” or “I care about what you are feeling; can you share it with me?” Feelings are facts.

Second—Don’t use zingers. He was referring to those potent memories of what somebody’s relative said at the wedding reception or at the blessing of the baby that caused feelings. When we are down it is tempting to throw these “zingers” at our spouses. Eliminate zingers from your life.

Third—get away together often. He advised us to get together by ourselves for twenty-four hours at a least once every three months and even recommended that in the poverty of one’s residency years one should try to find

other couples in the same boat to trade children with. Force yourself to get away from life's pressures. Stay away from telephones. Get away from your responsibilities so that you have uninterrupted time to look at each other, be with each other, talk to each other—and do it often!

Nelson: I tell my wife I love her every day, and I try to show that by leaving the problems of my profession behind me when I come home and focus at home on the opportunities that are there to promote the welfare of my wife and children. She makes that easy for me by allowing the reverse of that to happen. When I go to work, I have no concern about the family and the home. I can concentrate thoroughly and fully on the professional problems without having to worry about the family.

Harris: I believe this is a real problem area for doctors since they are so used to giving advice all day. In Church settings they give more advice. When they get home it is so easy to continue giving advice. However, at home it might not be so readily received. I have come to realize that in any sitting the more I use active listening, the better I communicate.

Another thing for young married people to think about is that wives need to talk to an adult on an adult level. And many find themselves spending most of their day in a child's world with their children. An effort must be made to improve communication.

Samuelson: Well, I'm not sure the assertion that medical marriages are at high risk is necessarily true. Medicine provides a number of excuses for neglecting all kinds of responsibilities in addition to professional. I think one has to recognize that a marriage, like any relationship or endeavor that is worthwhile, requires primary attention with quality time. One cannot let other responsibilities, whether they be Church or professional, encroach on the special demands of a marriage.

I had the strong impression that I should take this child out of school one day a month and go skiing alone with him. We have been doing this for a year and it is making a difference.

My practice is a little different than many because I'm an academician and have unique sorts of demands. For example, I have fewer emergency calls, but I do have professional responsibilities, speaking responsibilities, and committee assignments, such as hosting people we are recruiting. At the present time I'm chairman of the search committee looking for new people for our school of medicine. When these people are in town, it is possible that I can be gone every night. So I have a basic rule. Because I have five children ranging from sixteen down to two, I will give one evening a week for Church work and one night a week for professional work. I expect to be home the other evenings. It takes a real unusual situation or an emergency before I'm willing to commit more time than that.

Sometimes after prolonged commitments, you probably find yourself drained of physical, mental, and sometimes spiritual vigor. When this happens, what do you do to regenerate yourself?

Nelson: Fortunately we have the Sabbath, and I depend on the Sabbath totally for my regeneration and rejuvenation. If I can live Sunday to Sunday, I'll be all right.

Samuelson: I'm involved in large numbers of things including my professional work, my family, and my Church assignment. I find a change as invigorating as a rest. So for me to be in-

involved in all of these areas is very helpful.

My professional situation is different. In addition to practicing medicine, I'm involved in research, teaching students, and administrative duties as well. Also, I make sure that I program some time for myself. Frequently it is not for long periods. I'm not in a situation where I am comfortable taking off long periods of time, but I find it very useful to have an hour or two to myself. Usually my most effective times are early in the morning or late at night. Because of the nature of my family and the way we do things, it is easiest for me to not be disrupted early in the morning. So I frequently rise at 5:00 or 5:30 in the morning and, either in my office at home or at the medical school, block off some time to myself before the rush of the day comes.

Harris: I get a great deal of satisfaction out of doing other things than medicine. I read, and we take trips. I think pacing myself is absolutely important so I have scheduled my practice so that I have a full day off. I don't take part of a day or try to get out of the office by four o'clock. That doesn't work. On my day off I program things that I want to do to change my pace. I find that changing the pace has helped tremendously. My partner and I alternate our days off and our weekends off so that when I'm off, I'm really off and can regenerate myself.

Suppose one of your children faced difficult personal challenges that required your immediate attention, and you have a very busy schedule the next week. What would you do?

Harris: I've always felt that my family came first. Even in a Church assignment as a bishop I can turn to my counselor and say "Take over." I can talk to my partner and say I want to take next week off. We have an understanding. I can leave in emergencies.

Nelson: That has frequently occurred, and I have always responded to the op-

portunities to assist my children whenever those opportunities came—morning, noon, or night.

Samuelson: I think one has to consider emergencies, and physicians are ones that perhaps conceptualize emergencies better than anyone else. An emergency may be someone having a heart attack or could be a child that is emotionally or spiritually disheveled over a particular experience. I think that even those that have very busy schedules and are highly organized, committed, and programmed must still make time for emergencies. Most of the things that I have to do, even though they are very important, are not momentarily critical. So for a very unusual experience or event, I don't have problems sleeping nights for canceling a Church meeting or changing a patient that is scheduled. But those things don't happen very often.

Durham: When I was ordained a bishop, I carefully tried to assess the impact of the opportunity and responsibility on my five children. At one time it became clear to me that I was at high risk of losing touch with one particular child of mine due to the demands of the bishopric and my practice. I had the strong impression that I should take this child out of school one day a month and go skiing alone with him. We have been doing this for a year, and it is making a difference. Make specific use of the time you spend with your children.

How do you handle your Church assignments so that they don't interfere with your family and your practice?

Nelson: That has never really been a problem. By proper budgeting and scheduling it is generally possible to plan the day so that there aren't conflicts.

Harris: Some situations are easier than others. I've been in four bishoprics. It is harder as a counselor in a bishopric than if you are the bishop. As a bishop, you can call the meetings when you

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want them, and you can plan the visits when you want them. As a counselor you are kind of at the whim of the bishop, and you go when they go. That makes it a little more difficult.

Samuelson: I try to compartmentalize. I let people know that unless it's a real emergency, I will not do Church work while I am being paid to do something else. I ask people to either meet with me after hours or on the weekend, and that is when I try to do my Church work. I am very sensitive about not bringing discredit to the Church or myself by dealing with those kinds of issues except in emergencies or unusual situations. Likewise, my patients and my colleagues know that I have other interests and responsibilities.

In my present Church assignment, it is relatively easy because I schedule most of the meetings and interviews I have myself. I arrange for coverage when I'm in meetings, and I don't think that I've ever missed a meeting on Sunday that I've either had to conduct or preside at.

So it works very well both ways. I say to those I work with, "You call my anytime, but I will be forthright with you if you are interrupting me, and I'll have you call back, or I'll call you back." If I don't say that, they know that it isn't a problem.

Do you ever qualify the accepting of a

Church calling? If so, why?

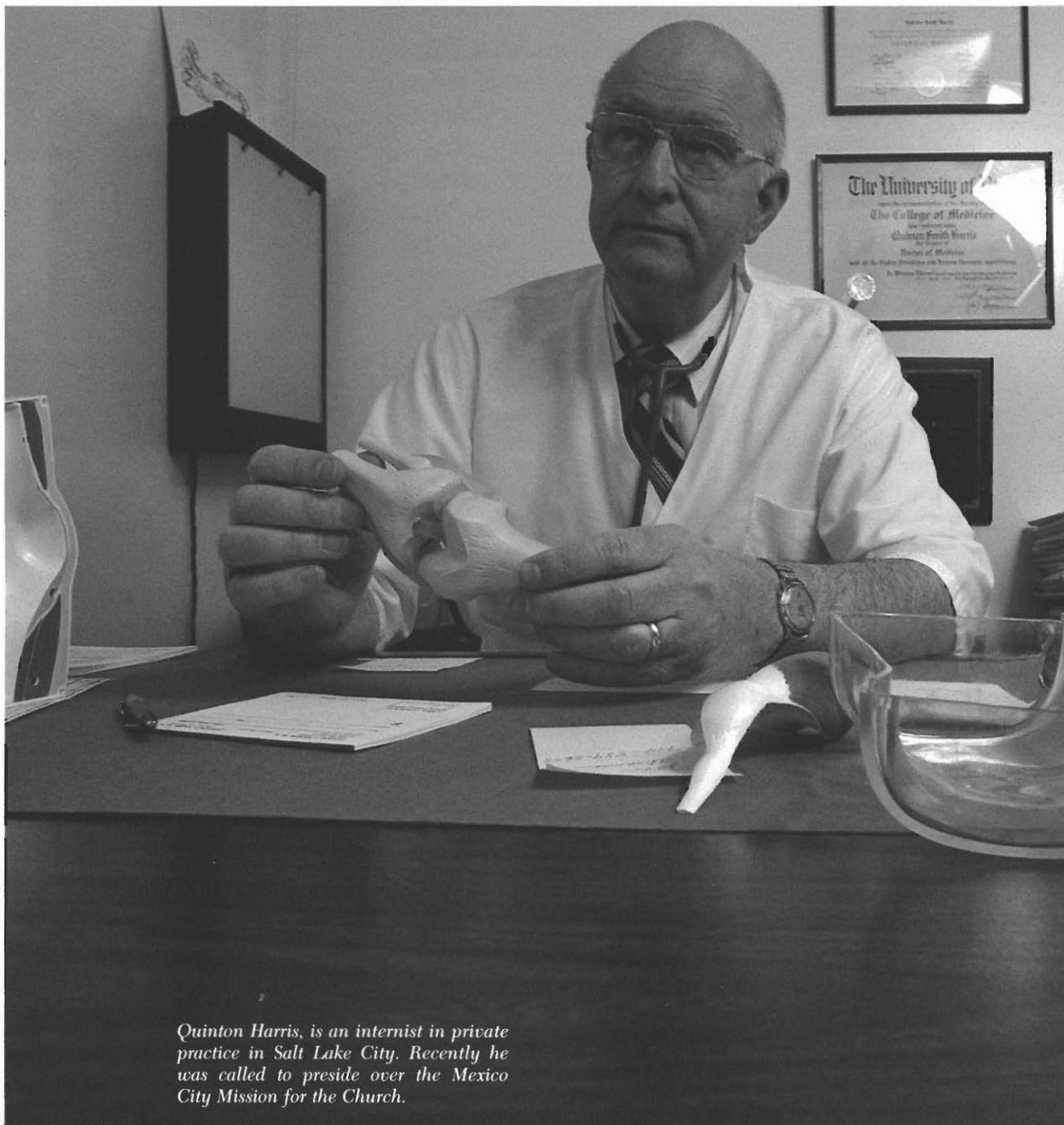
Nelson: No, I never have. I have always accepted whatever call came through proper priesthood authority.

Samuelson: I think that Latter-day Saints deserve the privilege of never having to turn down a Church call if they are faithful. However, I feel it is important for Church leaders to understand their circumstances. I've never turned down a call, but when someone has come to extend a call to me I've always felt it important, whether I've accepted it or whether they've chosen not to extend the call, to tell them my circumstances.

To my knowledge there has been only one time in my life when a call was suggested to me that wasn't finally extended.

My own style when extending a call, for example a stake calling, has been to approach the person and say, "I'm here to talk with you about such and such, and we want you to know that you have been cleared by the stake presidency and the high council for me to discuss this particular position with you. Before we extend the call, you need to know the expectations of the call are and this is what it would require and this is what we would expect of you, and we need to know what your circumstances are." Even a very inspired leader frequently may not know, for example, that someone has a teenage daughter that is acting up and that it wouldn't be a good time for the mother to be the mutual president. Or perhaps a family member is critically ill. I feel the responsibility, whenever a call comes, to clearly learn what it is that is expected and then clearly state what my capabilities and possible conflicts are.

I'll give you a concrete example. Even though I have a regional representative assignment, I was recently visited by the bishopric of my ward. They asked me if I would participate on the scout committee. I said, "I'll try to do whatever you ask me to do, but I need to review with you that my Sunday at-



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tendance in the ward is irregular.” They said, “We understand that. We think the major deed is an administrative one and that you could do that for us.” I answered, “That’s fine as long as you understand it will be difficult for me to meet at a set time every month.” We worked it out, and I felt very good about it. They appreciated my taking the call seriously enough to state the limitations that I have. We need to be

responsive to our leaders, but they need to understand what our circumstances are.

Harris: I’ve never turned one down. I’ve just done it, and it has worked out. It’s funny, as a bishop I never missed a meeting, whereas, after I was released, I missed three sacrament meetings in a row. I don’t know—there is just something that happens that takes care of it.

I think that goes along with commitment, and the good Lord works with you.

What guide do you use to help you establish your priorities?

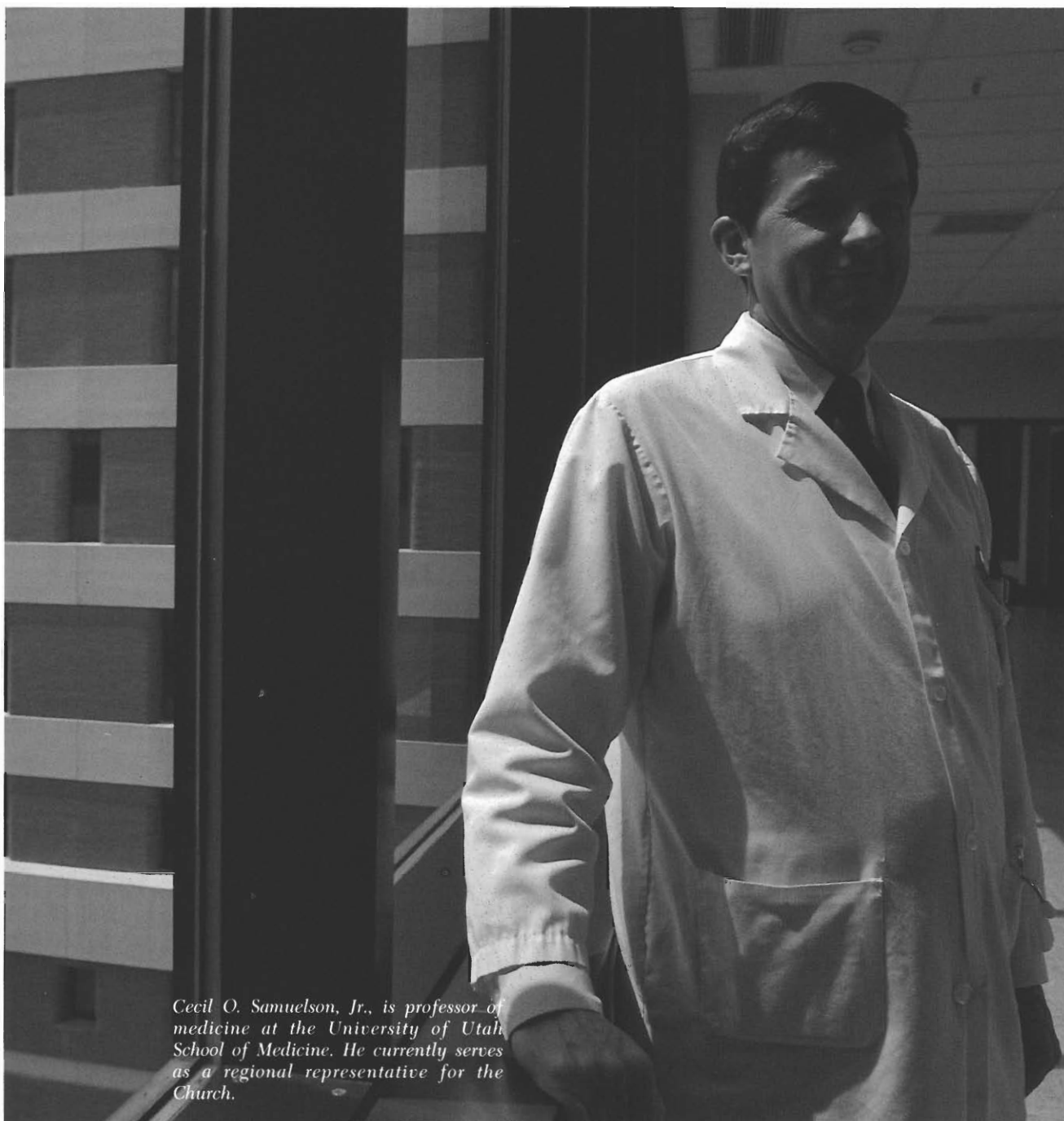
Durham: Priesthood is eternal, and if we are righteous, our family relationships are eternal. My M.D. from Duke University is not eternal, but the priest-

hood mission is—and my role as a father, husband, son, and brother can be eternal. Each is, therefore, ranked above my medical practice.

As I went to Duke there were two rules I made for myself. I had great respect for the opportunity that had been given to me to study medicine, and I was not going to take that for granted. But I knew that I would rather flunk out of medical school than flunk out of



Snyder



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marriage. The second rule was that except for emergencies when I was on call, I would refuse to crack a textbook or do anything related to my studies from 3 p.m. Saturday afternoon until Monday morning. In addition to the Sabbath, I would try to save some time on Saturday afternoon to have fun with my family. At that time I was married, and we had our first baby daughter. Family Home Evening was Saturday from 3 o'clock until Monday morning—unless I was on call.

I have modified these principles since but still try to live them. I am now on call frequently on Sundays. My wife and I do not participate very actively in any kind of Sunday evening activities, firesides, or Sunday groups. We felt that Sunday should be a time for our own children.

Nelson: The general priorities always are wife and family first and the Church second and the career third. But when it comes to the practical allocation of time, I am rarely forced to apply that priority scale. I can usually do all three during the course of each day as necessary.

Samuelson: I try to do a couple of things to establish priorities. First, I try to keep a list of priorities of things that are most important for me all the time and work on the most important things. Second, I try to not build unreasonable expectations for myself. For example, there is always pressure on me to see additional patients. I am pleased about that, and I suppose there is some ego satisfaction. A considerable number of my patients are the family or relatives of my colleagues and other physicians. It is very difficult to deal with the pressures when a patient of that kind calls you.

I have a system worked out, and it has taken me several years to fine tune it. I am only in my office at certain times, and when I am not doing office work I go someplace else. I have another office, and I do some of my academics there. If a patient calls and wants to talk to me and I'm not in the clinic,

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then they have the option of talking with one of my colleagues or waiting until I get back. I've already mentioned that I deal in the same context with my Church responsibilities.

In 19 years of married life, I've never had to cancel a family vacation. We've had a couple that started a few hours late, but that is the worst it's been. I've never completely missed a birthday party. If I tell my kids we're going to the ball game, we go to the ball game. I go to extraordinary lengths to make sure that things don't interfere.

That is the way I do it. It is not a perfect system. It's almost always a struggle because rarely a day goes by when there isn't something unexpected. But for me that is one of the things that makes life exciting rather than frustrating.

Harris: Many years ago I went home one night, and my wife informed me that we had three things to go to. I was tired, and I didn't want to go anywhere. She also informed me that the next night we had three things on and also each night for the week. We didn't go anywhere that night. We sat down and set up a priority list. And now when I'm invited to something or I get a letter in the mail requesting my presence somewhere or I get a phone call—whatever—I go quickly down my priority list and see where it fits in. I evaluate it in terms of that list. It is not a difficult

thing to do. I used to have play tickets, basketball tickets, football tickets, and tickets to this and that and the other set up on days I had no control. Now I miss ball games, I miss the plays, and I don't even feel guilty about it. I have that priority list, and I know that I'm doing what I want to do. I just look at it as an opportunity to give tickets away to somebody. That has taken the strain out of it. Before I was struggling to get everything done; I *had* to do so many things. Once I stopped having to do them, there was no more resistance.

Say you have a patient that you know is in pathologically serious condition, and the patient asks you for a priesthood administration. How do you react? Do you feel that a physician should fill both priesthood and medical roles in this instance?

Harris: I do that all the time. I have had that happen three times in the last two weeks. I feel very happy to do it. There is no problem. I think I need all the help I can get. If I do it with inspiration, I get the help. I do not suggest it, but if it is requested of me, I respond.

Nelson: I often do, yes. I've never turned down anyone who asks for a priesthood blessing, whether he is my patient, neighbor, or anyone else.

Samuelson: I think it depends on the situation. I try to not mix the metaphors where I can, but I have administered to my patients because some of them have known me in other contexts. I try to teach somewhat obliquely that we ought to, when possible, have priesthood blessings from our family and when that isn't possible, from our home teachers or quorum leaders. I am not be diametrically opposed to giving blessings, but I think it is easier for everyone if metaphors are not mixed.

I think that those kinds of relationships are important, and I think they tend to be cleaner and easier if one isn't mixing metaphors. But I don't absolutely say no to a request for blessings.

Each role you have is capable of exhausting all of your available time. What's your secret?

Nelson: I think there are two or three secrets. One is to get up early in the morning (around 5:00 or 5:15) and get a head start. It helps me to not get behind and also gives me some quiet personal time for spiritual scripture reading, practicing the organ, or meditating and planning. I think some others get in trouble because they try to do it all in the same amount of time as people who don't have all those responsibilities, and that really is tough.

Second, organize your work well, and don't do anything that somebody else in your organization can do just as well as you can. This applies to work, Church, or home.

The third thing is to realize the old adage that you can only do one thing at a time isn't necessarily true. There are some things that you can do very well concurrently. For example, I can read the paper, shave, and listen to the morning news on television all at the same time. I can sign the mail and return phone calls at the same time. I can drive the car and listen to language-learning tapes at the same time. You can train yourself to do more than one thing at a time if those things are routine and do not require too much concentration.

Do you have any suggestions for how spouses of physicians could be supportive of the physicians' challenges?

Harris: They have to learn to roll with the system. It is hard, and they have to recognize early that it is not an easy life. And yet, they have to find fulfillment in their own right—doing their own things. Those that do are growing, progressing, and happy. When you find those that are continually waiting for the doctor and bowing to all his time demands, you find resentment. Depression can be a real problem.

Nelson: Specifically, my wife was very helpful to me as I served for nearly

My wife was very helpful to me as I served for nearly eight years as a stake president. She was my appointment secretary for my Church appointments. No one else could have done a better job than she did simply because she was closest to me in my daily scheduling, which was unpredictable from day to day.

eight years as a stake president. She was my appointment secretary for my Church appointments. No one else could have done a better job than she did simply because she was closest to me in my daily scheduling, which was unpredictable from day to day. She really not only made it possible for me to do my Church work, but made it possible for me to do my family activities as well. She is still in charge of scheduling our family time.

Samuelson: The only way, in my judgment, that a spouse can be supportive is to understand. And the only way that a spouse can understand is to be involved. The only way a spouse can be involved is to have communication. I liked President Hinckley's statement when he said he didn't understand all of the hassle about communication when all people needed to do was talk to each other. It is very easy for us to not do all of the sharing that we need to do. I think that it is unrealistic for a husband or wife to be expected to be supportive and enthusiastic about whatever it is their mate is involved in unless they understand what it is about.

Are there any other comments pertaining to the priesthood, parenthood, and practice that you would like to make?

Samuelson: Only that they are all important and all ought to strive very hard to not get overbalanced in any particular area. I think we are all familiar with physicians who neglect family and Church responsibilities and are excellent physicians. I think I see from time to time people who are mediocre physicians, frankly, because they sort of have the idea that if they are effective or stalwart Church leaders, that they really don't have to work at anything else. My only plea is that people recognize that it is a struggle for all of us and that each of these areas of our lives really require attention, and each of them will fit reasonably well if given time.

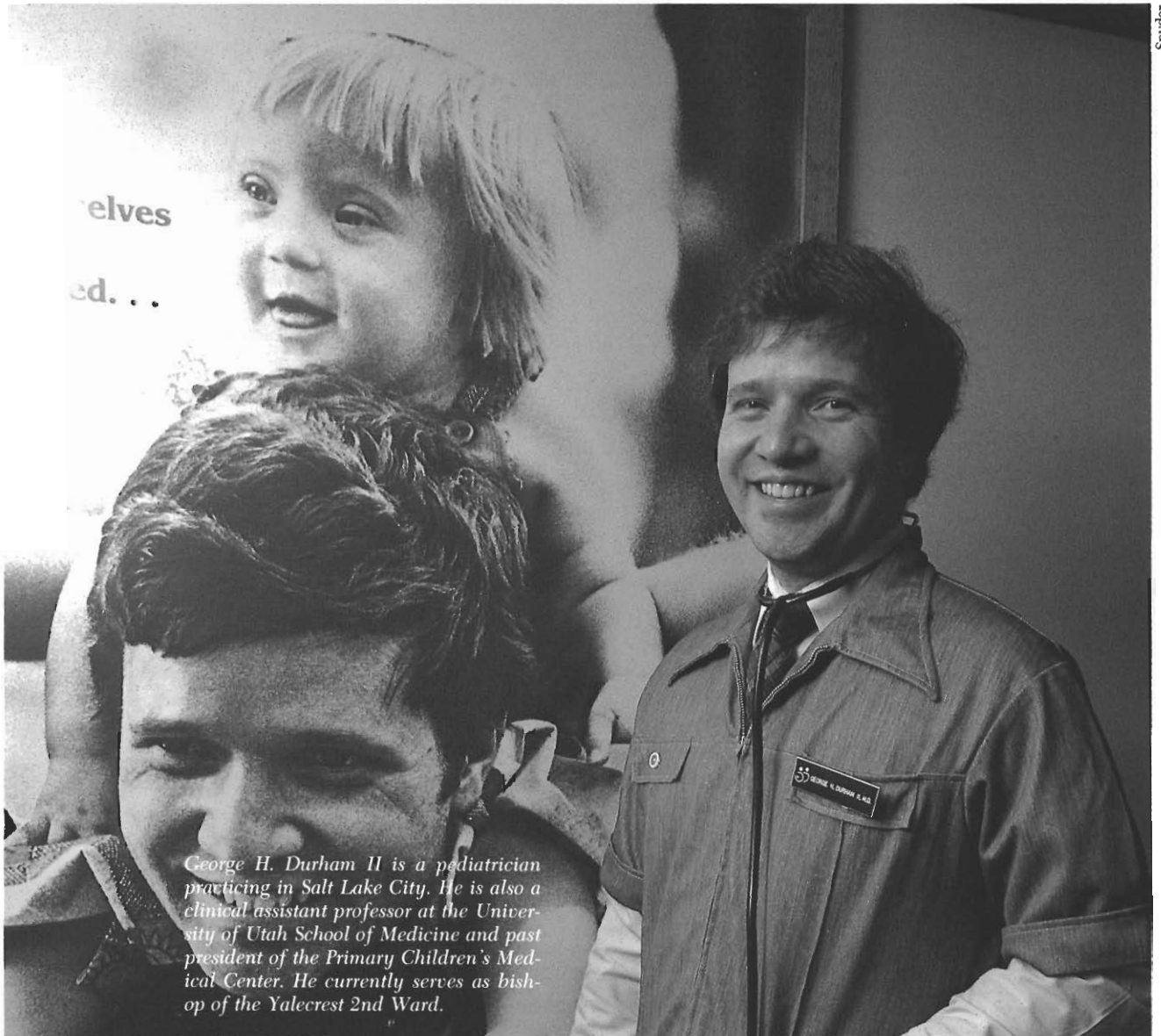
Harris: One difficulty that some might run into is dealing with a request that runs counter to Church teachings or principles. This would include such things as abortions, premarital sex, vasectomies, etc. I haven't personally had many problems with this, perhaps because of my basic philosophy regarding it. When the problem arises, I try to merely help the patient explore all the options and the consequences that might arise if a particular option is decided upon. Then I feel that it is the patient's decision. If they desire a referral, I then give it to them. I fully realize that if I were the urologist or gynecologist on the receiving end, the one who had to perform the procedure, I would have a much more difficult time. How culpable I am in this regard I do not know. Perhaps this is just a cop-out. There is no question that the Church has spoken strongly against this. I believe that I have developed an argument which is nonmoral, nonreligious, yet which is medically sound and substantiates Church doctrine. If they choose not to accept it, then I respond to their request.

Another difficulty is the uniting of a family when the demands are so great and tend to divide it. One of the best



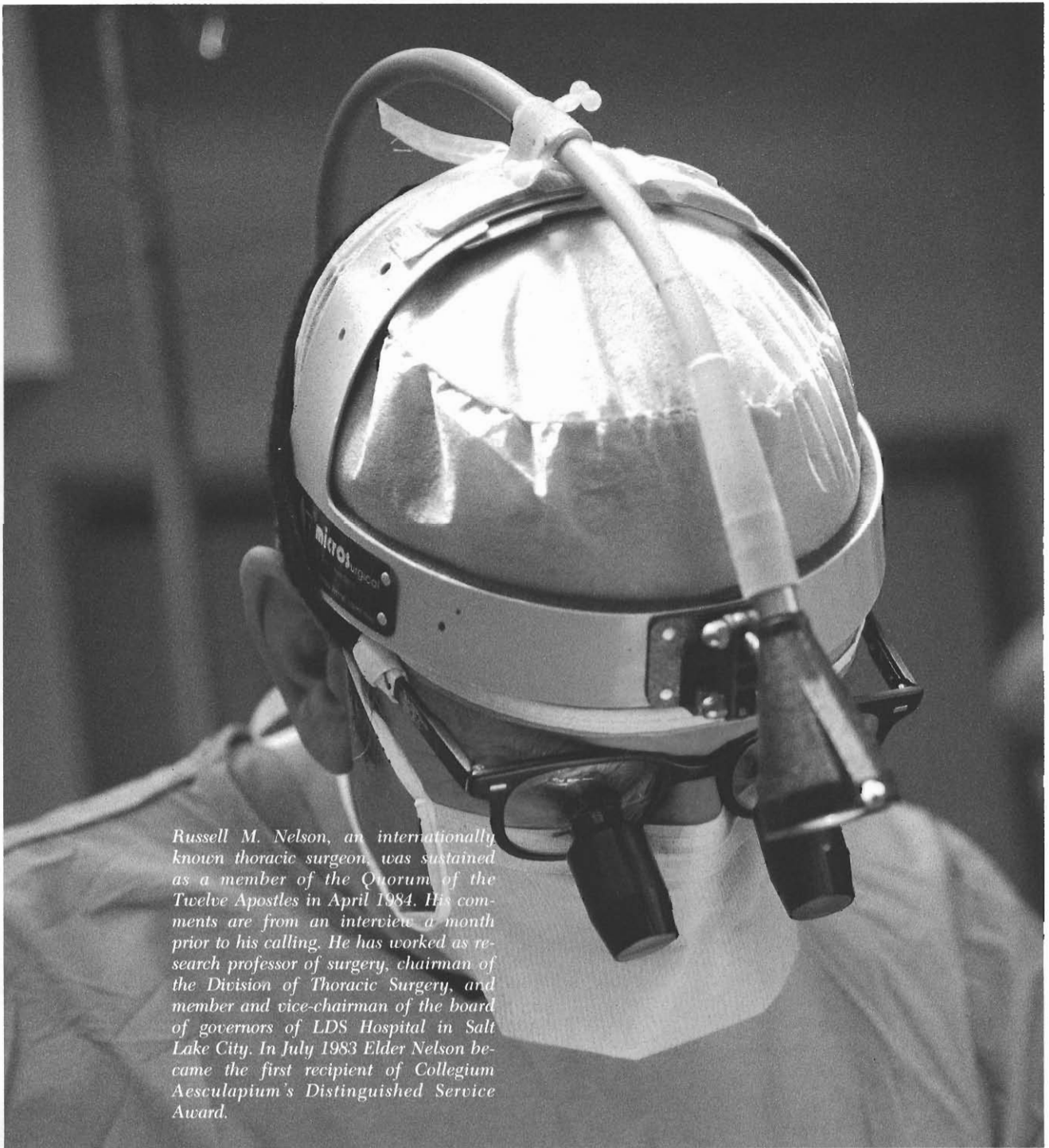
things we have done is to try to develop family traditions. One major tradition is to travel together. We have been to Canada, Mexico, Hawaii, Africa, and all over the United States. We just returned from a week together in Hawaii. Perhaps one of the most interesting trips was our East Mediterranean cruise. We have so many rich memories as a result. Even during the pressure of everyday living we can laugh and cry as we recall these experiences.

Another thing that I felt most strongly about when the kids were little was to have talk time with them each day if possible. It didn't take long, maybe 10 or 15 minutes each. I don't



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Snyder



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have a large family—just three boys—and they were far enough apart that I could relate to each one on a different level. We would just talk about anything they wanted to talk about. One day I realized that I had left my wife out of this type of experience, so I repented and stopped taking her for granted.

Nelson: I think that we haven't mentioned the power of the priesthood. I think one should recognize that the priesthood contains in it a power that enables you to be better than you otherwise would be and to do more than you otherwise could. The power of the priesthood needs to be emphasized and exercised. ❧

