

**Archival & Historical Committee  
March 19, 2011  
Marriott Rivercenter Hotel  
San Antonio, Texas**

**Interview with  
N. Robert Brethouwer, DO, FACOFP  
ACOFP President 1992-1993**

Committee Chair: We welcome you here today, Dr. Brethouwer. To begin we would like to hear your basics. Where did you go to medical school? Where did you grow up, and how did you get into medicine?

Dr. Brethouwer: First of all, I pronounce it Bret – houwer instead of Breth – ouwer. I used to correct patients way back, but I gave up and anything that resembles my last name is OK. I was born in Los Angeles, California while my father was a senior at Loma Linda Medical College and grew up in Montrose, Colorado. I went to the University of Nebraska for my bachelor's degree and I continue to live in Colorado. I went to the university because I had a sister living in Lincoln. I just got out of the service and wanted to be around family. I finished the University of Nebraska and went to Kansas City. Kansas City at that time was called KCCOM and since has gone through four or five name changes; similar to ACGP no longer being ACGP.

My father was an MD as was my grandfather; as was my great grandfather and going back to arriving from Holland. I am descendent from Pennsylvania Dutch. I was in the service which caused later entrance into college. I applied to allopathic and osteopathic medical school at the same time. The University of Colorado Medical School said, "You ought to wait a year."

Committee Member: I remember when you were a student at Kansas City College and Kansas City said, "No, you can start now." I didn't see much difference. My dad did, but I didn't. When I went into practice with him, and I practiced with my father for about 17 years. He asked me a lot of questions-and learned from me and I learned from him. It went back and forth. I don't think he minded.

Committee Member: Was he close by, his practice?

Dr. Brethouwer: We practiced together.

Committee Member: Together. Oh did you?

Dr. Brethouwer: We had the same office, so we did well. That goes back many years. I've been in practice, what, 44 years now about, 1965/1966.

Committee Member: This is the 46th year.

Dr. Brethouwer: Is it really?

Committee Member: Yes, 1965.

Committee Chair: Are you still in active practice?

Dr. Brethouwer: Yes, for a while until (Osteopathic Continuing Curriculum) OCC catches up with me.

Committee Chair: And where are you practicing right now?

Dr. Brethouwer: Montrose, Colorado, same town that I've been for the last 45/46 years and still enjoy it. I work about 20 hours per week and I have Friday, Saturday, and Sunday off. On a Wednesday morning, I go to a free clinic in a little town nearby. I practice my Spanish on illegal and legal Spanish people, and it's rewarding. I'm also a medical director of a nursing home and have many patients I care for. Once a week I also go to a neighboring town and check out the prisoners in their county jail and that takes an hour or two. It's just a variety of things.

Committee Member: You used to be in charge of the emergency room weren't you?

Dr. Brethouwer: Yes, at one time I did emergency medicine, but that's been many years ago.

The hours in the emergency room got in the way trying to keep your practice going during the week.

Committee Chair: What year did you go into practice?

Dr. Brethouwer: 1966.

Committee Chair: Did you do an internship?

Dr. Brethouwer: Yes, internship in Denver at Rocky Mountain Osteopathic Hospital.

Committee Member: Rocky Mountain.

Dr. Brethouwer: That's right, Rocky Mountain Hospital. They ceased to exist ten years later.

Committee Chair: That was a one-year rotating internship and then straight into practice?

Dr. Brethouwer: Right. There was not-such things as family practice residency. That didn't happen yet.

Committee Member: That's correct.

Dr. Brethouwer: C'est la vie.

Committee Member: Graduated the same year.

Committee Chair: Editorial note, those are good things to get into the recording.

Dr. Brethouwer: Right.

Committee Chair: What age did you find out about ACGP? It was called ACGP then, correct?

Dr. Brethouwer: Right. I found out about the organization when I was a student. That was the thing, entering family practice, or general practice, that's primarily what was available. It was the unusual guy that went into surgery or decided internal medicine or obstetrics was better, because he couldn't hack it as a general practitioner. We were trained in all aspects of general practice. ACGP was not a factor really until we got out of internship and started practice. I represented the student body G. P. Club as a guest at the ACGP Annual Meeting in Las Vegas and I was a senior. My first meeting, I think was in Hawaii after

graduation. I was one of the members of a “thinking committee.” I am not sure of its original name, but that became the Executive Council of the Conclave of Fellows.

Dr. Brethouwer: Jim Rowland was the instigator of the committee and initiated the organization.

Committee Member: Kansas City.

Dr. Brethouwer: Right, I worked with Jim Rowland because he chaired it for three or four years. Subsequently, we established different time periods we rotated in the committee. Each member was in for so many years.

Committee Chair: What was the function?

Dr. Brethouwer: Just thinking, planning for our general practice organization ACGP.

Committee Member: Not the Conclave?

Dr. Brethouwer: Yes, Conclave. This name was given to a group consisting of Fellows in our ACGP generating new ideas and long range planning for our ACGP. I was involved in the Executive Council on Conclave of Fellows for six years and during this time period, I was also creating cartoons. We had a paper at that time and so I did cartoons. I enjoyed poking fun at the specialties and I was fortunate to publish the cartoons maybe ten years in our ACGP monthly paper.

Committee Member: Oh quite awhile.

Dr. Brethouwer: I was elected to the board and served for about eight or nine years culminating in my presidency. I created three published cartoon books when I was a student. One was “My Doctor's Son”, “Semi-Private” and while in the Air Force I wrote a booklet entitled “Air Farce” prior to school. I made fun of all of our teachers that taught anatomy, pathology and so forth. I still have some copies at home. Yes, the book was only for the college and its students.

Committee Member: We put it in our paper.

Dr. Brethouwer: It was a parody.

Committee Chair: In a previous interview, it was stated by one of our interviewees that in those days, which was about the same time, that the professors acted like gods and that you were to respond that way, by dressing appropriately, and doing exactly what they say. So how did those cartoons affect the professors?

Dr. Brethouwer: Right. Well they didn't kick me out, yet I don't think they really liked the humor. But to say that you don't like the cartoon means that you don't have a sense of humor or a caricature.

I still do caricatures. My hospital in Montrose, Colorado, has three and a half walls worth of caricatures of all the members of our staff. We've had to retire a lot of them who've left and/or died, but still we got three walls filled. We have 90 on our staff and so there are 90 caricatures.

Other hobbies include motorcycling that I began at 50 years old going from Montrose County to Vancouver, Canada 15 times and Old Mexico five times. That's been quite a hobby. I started golf at age 65. I thought I was old enough to participate. I directed 18 plays at our community theater, initiated barbershop singing in our town 34 years ago, and exhibited in three art shows doing oils and acrylics in Montrose. Those are the extracurricular activities.

Committee Chair: Who was the influence that brought you into leadership or in ACGP?  
memorable people?

Dr. Brethouwer: Jim Rowland, Joe Namey, Frank McDevitt, Mary and John Burnett, Michael Avallone, Ron Goldgerg, and Bob George.

Dr. Brethouwer: Namey probably and then the circle of guys around him. The group was quite a circle of good old gentlemen in those days.

Dr. Brethouwer: Right. Those are the guys that could help you advance in leadership areas.

Committee Member: And were seeking later.

Dr. Brethouwer: Marcelino Oliva, that's right. This was the area that they held out a few of us younger guys to get involved.

Committee Member: Like did Piper?

Dr. Brethouwer: Oh Piper too, yes.

Committee Member: Did he get you involved? He was from Colorado wasn't he?

Dr. Brethouwer: I'm sure he was helpful. I hung around these guys we just mentioned and you asked to help, to do what you could. All throughout, of course, I was still getting the cartoons in the paper. I was kind of accepted into the group and given other duties. That's how I got into the board. When I was president, I made Michael Avallone our chair of entertainment for our annual meeting. We had some nice shows for our entertainment in the past, for our people that attended. We don't do this anymore because it's too expensive.

Committee Member: We made a convention chair.

Dr. Brethouwer: Oh that's right, convention chair. I wish I hadn't made that recommendation but that was a couple years later because he kind of took over totally and enjoyed it doing a great job.

Committee Member: It was a good choice.

Dr. Brethouwer: Yes, he had a lot of energy and we had some great times at those parties that he had for us. The expense just didn't seem to matter did it?

Committee Member: No, because we always made money.

Dr. Brethouwer: Yes, and somehow that kind of died off. When was our last party that we had, that big play? That's been 10 years hasn't it?

Committee Member: It's been quite a while.

Dr. Brethouwer: It's been quite some time since we had nice entertainment followed with a dance. We have the show, then the dance, and then we'd have all these eats.

Committee Member: Sit down dinner.

Dr. Brethouwer: That was great fun. Of course, at the same time we had extraordinary exhibits because the representatives could disseminate all kinds of promotional materials, which they can't do now.

I originated fall clinics in Montrose 38 years ago. The clinic started very small due to a small staff. I think there were 12 on staff and I met with the administrator for a little special meeting. We named the venture "The Fall Clinics, and we invited numerous guests to speak from Grand Junction, 60 miles away. It's been very active and grown tremendously with speakers that we bring in from the West Coast, East Coast, to Denver. We have some top names that have come to speak to us. We only offer 10 hours of credit. It's a day and a half on a weekend and it's been very popular, and well attended. We had exhibitors and the Friday night banquet and entertainment was always successful. We had little problem contracting vendors. They're anxious to get in there and pay their \$500 for their booth. We keep the number of vendors to 16 or 17 booths. The Fall Clinic continues to be a live program. We featured topics of interest to primary medicine and a retired as chairman of the Fall Clinics this year. So I don't know why we lose money with exhibitors for the national meetings, unless we pay too much for a large room that we really don't need. I think one of the problems is that the vendors because they pay through the nose for their booths and we don't have to have as many as we've had before.

Committee Member: Someone mentioned that the ancillary staff at the hotel that sets up the booth charge crazy amounts.

Committee Chair: Who were the executive directors that you served under or served with?

Dr. Brethouwer: The first one was a crook. Do you remember him?

Committee Chair: We've heard.

Dr. Brethouwer: He's also a little light in the loafers as well. We had a meeting in New Mexico. Do you remember the New Mexico meeting? You weren't involved. But we were a little tight on rooms and I was on the conference committee and was program chair and shared a room with him. Light in his loafers and I had to set things straight. But that's part of his many problems. His other problem was money, but I never did quite understand what happened to some of the money that was involved. But once he was out, things were much more organized and we kind of became an organization that was financially stable.

Committee Chair: Who followed him?

Dr. Brethouwer: Betty Vaught. Yes. I thought she was wonderful. I thought she did a good job.

Committee Member: She did do a great job.

Dr. Brethouwer: The transition between Betty Vaught and Nyhart, I don't remember that. I think she just had to quit or something. I think she just retired.

Committee Chair: You said Betty was easy to work with.

Dr. Brethouwer: Oh yes.

Committee Chair: Tell us about it.

Committee Member: She was a great organizer.

Dr. Brethouwer: She was. She organized everything that we did, but she had help and we didn't give her a lot of help in the main office. I don't think she took advantage of her position at all. She just worked with all of us and I thought it went very smoothly. I just don't recall why she retired. I know George came in and I thought he did a great job.

Committee Member: He did.

Dr. Brethouwer: He sure took me around Washington DC. I'm telling you, he knew that town from way back. We had a meeting there once and he showed me all around.



He had a little chair in the cathedral there. What do you call it, the main cathedral in Washington DC up on the Hill?

Committee Member: The National.

Dr. Brethouwer: Yeah, that's right. He had bought a little chair for his one child that had died at two or three years of age and he showed me her chair. There was a little special place where they could buy a chair, something in memoriam. Soon after I think he got booted out. I was not involved in that. But like I said, I think Royce was.

Committee Chair: Tell us about that first year or two as we started to reform as the ACGP. John Sevastos told us the story of the transition.

Dr. Brethouwer: John had some great ideas and his one big idea was the fellow awards and marching in with a mace dressed in our robes to pomp & circumstance.

Committee Member: I think that was part of the certification, he and Mary and John.

Dr. Brethouwer: Right. But John got the mace.

Dr. Brethouwer: He created the mace as well as the robes and so forth and the development of a magnificent ceremony. In the first couple years with the fellowship awards it was really kind of neat. Now it's kind of boiled down to: This event that we do one night and where you receive your robes. It doesn't have the pomp and the circumstance really that I thought went with it initially.

Committee Member: Yeah, because they combined the dinner. The dinner now is with the Presidential dinner. You get a different crowd.

Dr. Brethouwer: Yeah, tonight they're going to have the ceremony, but who's going to go? Well the family of the new guys coming in.

Committee Member: Exactly.

Dr. Brethouwer: And that's all who is going to be there.

Committee Chair: How was it? What was the previous pomp and circumstance?

Dr. Brethouwer: There wasn't any. You mean when it first started?

Committee Member: It was just the family involvement I think.

Dr. Brethouwer: Until he came up with this idea, I don't recall how we did it. I think it was just during the dinner when we introduced the board.

Committee Member: Now we do the whole event in an hour and a half where it used to be more time involved with the whole program.

Dr. Brethouwer: Yes, we start the dinner with it. Everybody be seated and here would come the sound of the pomp and circumstance. The doors would open and the Fellows in their robes and chain medallions would march into the room.

Committee Member: We still march into that.

Dr. Brethouwer: And then the Fellows and dignitaries would march in and they would take their assigned seats. It was a long evening, so probably what they're doing now, is fine. But the fellows and new initiates don't get the recognition from the members of the ACOFP at the presidential dinner like we used to do.

Committee Chair: Did you have anything to do with the formation of Colorado's society?

Dr. Brethouwer: No, I was just a supporter. I'm in western Colorado in a small town of Montrose, Colorado. There's the Continental Divide between me and Denver and Denver with its large population. Montrose's population is about 15,000 where I'm living and it was difficult for travel to Denver. It was 300 miles over the mountain pass and in winter sometimes passable, sometimes not. There was not a lot of communication for me to go over to the meetings. I would go over for the annual convention and that was all. As far as any committee work and so forth, it was not too feasible because of a six hour travel time to and from.

Committee Member: During your tenure, any issues that were big, thinking it was kind of monumental or memorable for you either negative or positive?

Dr. Brethouwer: Are we up to the presidency now?

Committee Member: Yes or even before it.

Committee Chair: Or during your board.

Committee Member: Anytime. We like to hear stories.

Dr. Brethouwer: Oh really. When I was on the board, we had little names for everybody on the board. Avallone kind of started it, like the “Cobra”, “Colorado Bob.

Committee Member: That was Mike's doing.

Dr. Brethouwer: Yes, Mike. Everybody had a little pet name and some of them were real funny. I can't even recall all of them.

Dr. Brethouwer: For the presidency, one of my main focuses was to redesign our seal. Is that what we call it, a seal? Yes anyway, I redesigned the seal.

Committee Member: You designed it, just to make that clear.

Dr. Brethouwer: Yes, and I got that passed by the board because it was updated and contemporary. We had a 3D logo concept that was really neat, but it was too expensive. We had it for seals. Have you seen anything around?

Committee Member: Is that the one that's on the crest?

Dr. Brethouwer: Yes, somewhat. Secondly, in my visitations as president, one of my main themes was: *Let's consider a name change*. I encouraged being proactive with our medical compadres and be viewed as family practice instead of general practice physicians. This was during the period developing our certification phase which had been in place for some time working very well. However, we were general practice with certification. The idea did not make sense to certify general practice, but to certify family practice was reasonable.

Committee Member: Are we talking about the reimbursement?

Dr. Brethouwer: Oh reimbursement was primary. We traveled to the state societies and discussing the changes as our primary focus. We encouraged each state to

consider the name change and the benefit to their members. When we arrived to the last of my regime, myself and the board-brought this to a vote with the ACOFP delegates. California in particular expressed the most interest. Their delegates were first to get up and say "Yes." The ideas were voted upon to change our name. The amendment was passed very quickly from the podium. That was just before I left office. Of course my ring says ACGP, which I felt wasn't fair. When I got it, we were still GP.

Committee Chair: Was it contentious though?

Dr. Brethouwer: What?

Committee Chair: The way you described the vote that process was easy and it passed by a broad margin. Is that true or was it contentious and passed by a narrow margin?

Dr. Brethouwer: It was contentious. No, it passed by a large vote.

Committee Member: There were voices against it the amendment.

Dr. Brethouwer: There were voices against the changes. Always a voice against change. I think some of our older ones, they were against change. What was good for us is still good for the future. But that was ironed out and they accepted the vote of the delegation 70/30 or something like that. Don't you think?

Committee Member: The students got really behind it.

Dr. Brethouwer: Oh yeah, students and the residents, of course they weren't delegates because they were unable to be a delegate, a voting delegate.

Committee Member: They can now.

Dr. Brethouwer: Can they now?

Committee Member: Uh-huh.

Dr. Brethouwer: What else could there be?

Committee Chair: Other stories or colorful characters.

Dr. Brethouwer: Oh, Royce Keilers got to be one of them. He's quite a mover. Name some others.

Committee Chair: Namey.

Dr. Brethouwer: Namey, forced me to give a thousand dollars for the fountain in the lobby of the Chicago office as part of the building fund.

Dr. Brethouwer: He just said that everybody ought to pay a thousand for the building fund for the new building when we moved into it.

Committee Chair: So is that his character?

Dr. Brethouwer: Namey was rather forceful. He had some people behind him, so that was one thing I remember that we did.

Committee Chair: John Burnett.

Dr. Brethouwer: Nice guy. I didn't know him too well. I knew Mary much better than he. I do remember that he liked Cooks College\* or whatever it was. I remember he liked that.

Committee Member: McDevitt.

Dr. Brethouwer: McDevitt, he was fine. He had good ideas. He was very forceful in his ideas.

Committee Member: But his ideas were very good and very well planned out.

Dr. Brethouwer: Yes, he was a good thinker. He really was, and I don't recall all that he managed to accomplish, but I'm sure that he's going to be at the top. He was a very cohesive force for the board and for the college.

Committee Chair: Mary Burnett.

Dr. Brethouwer: Real sweetheart. I wonder how she's doing. Have you heard? Two years ago I saw her, and she was smart, generous and fair in her options.

Committee Member: I haven't seen her at this conference this time. The Past President's Council recently passed where we're going to compile a list serve to allow us more

access to information of life and professional events of past presidents because many times we're left out of the loop.

Dr. Brethouwer: I just know Mary Burnett is in a retirement home outside of Denver.

Committee Chair: What were her defining characteristics? You said sweet.

Dr. Brethouwer: Well she was a leader. She did it the right way one should lead. She was our first women president.

Committee Member: I would add that she was very well organized.

Committee Chair: At her inauguration as the first women, was there much ado about that?

Committee Member: I don't think so.

Dr. Brethouwer: No, I don't recall anything.

Committee Member: Mary was well accepted.

Committee Chair: T. R. Sharp.

Dr. Brethouwer: Our historian for a long time, but I haven't seen him forever.

Committee Chair: What was he like?

Dr. Brethouwer: He was a jovial Texan and that's all I recall. He had a good smile all the time. I think he asked to be the historian.

Committee Member: Yeah. Tell me what your biggest disappointment as president was. None, I guess.

Dr. Brethouwer: I don't recall a disappointment. There's got to be some disappointments. However, I thought taking the board to London was a great idea and fun. That was one of the last times I think we got out of the United States after that. Did you go out?

Committee Member: That was great. It cost just about the same as it did doing something in the states.

Dr. Brethouwer: We had 12 on the board. Wasn't it 12? The trip included wives. We had 24, plus people from the college who went with us. That was maybe three or four

people. We had maybe 30 people that ACOFP sponsored for meals, hotel and so forth. Our budget was defined prior and we never exceeded. I think the next year... Well that was kind of neat when we went to the French Rivera. Who did that? Oh, it was Ron Goldberg.

Dr. Brethouwer: Robert George, Ron Goldberg, and Avallone made a triad. Real nice guys.

Committee Chair: Well we tend to ask this the last question: What do you envision as the future for ACOFP or family medicine?

Dr. Brethouwer: Well I see it becoming more involved with the feds, with our MD established medicine because that's who established our certifications in each of the states, the boards in each of the states. The boards now of course have MD DOs on them, most of them, and as they should have. But I see us kind of moving more and more into a jurisdiction of laws and regulation that they eventually will have minimal difference between the DO and the MD. That's where I see it going and I don't like to see it going that way, but I don't know how we're going to overpower the way things are. I don't see how we're going to do that. Joint certification presents its own set of complications. If we could maintain certification through the AOA and through us, I think we have a chance of staying separate for many years, but I see that kind of having some problems too in the next decade. That's what I see, and I don't mean to be pessimistic about it

Committee Chair: Any other comments?

Dr. Brethouwer: Well it's awfully nice of you to take this time to interview the guys. That's good.

Committee Chair: We appreciate that; however, that's my line. We really appreciate your being here. This is a valuable addition to what we're trying to capture and appreciate

so much that you're here to do it. Thank you for taking the time and thank you  
for the memories.

Dr. Brethouwer: Thank you very much.

(Applause)