



## The brilliant brothers behind the Mayo Clinic

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Today, we celebrate the birthday of Dr. William (Will) Mayo, the elder half of one of American medicine's most dynamic duos. He is best known as one of the founders (with his brother Charles, better known as Charlie, and their father, William) of the storied Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota.

He was born in Le Sueur, Minnesota, in 1861. Will's father, William Worrell Mayo, was a physician and general practitioner. In 1864, during the Civil War, W.W. Mayo (the father) was named an examining physician for the U.S. Army enrollment and recruitment board, which was based in Rochester. In 1865, when Charles was born, the family decided to stay in Rochester, where W.W. Mayo soon became one of the leading physicians in the region.

Even as young boys, the Mayo brothers were recruited into helping their father's practice. They took on all sorts of chores such as tending to and saddling up the doctor's horses, compounding pills and potions prescribed to the patients, and many basic tasks of patient care. Well-schooled in foreign languages and the sciences, young Will was a perfect candidate for the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, which was home to one of the finest medical schools in the nation.

Passing his entrance examinations with flying colors, Will matriculated in 1880. Michigan offered a rigorous, graded three-year program featuring both didactic lecture courses and time spent caring for patients in a new university hospital. Ironically, time spent attending real patients was then a relatively new feature of American medical education.

Will Mayo rose to become an assistant in surgery and a demonstrator in anatomy at Michigan, but one of his professors told him he would never succeed in medicine. Undaunted, Will returned home to Rochester on June 28, 1883 to join his father's practice. A few years later, Charlie began medical school at Chicago's Northwestern University, from which he graduated in March of 1888, and he, too, joined the family practice.

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Both Will and Charlie Mayo were gifted surgeons, always on the prowl for new techniques and procedures that would help their patients. They could not have found a better time during the 19th century to begin this task. For example, the benefits of antiseptic surgery, as prescribed by Dr. Joseph Lister of Edinburgh, were just beginning to be adopted by some of the most prominent and most forward-thinking surgeons in the United States.

To expand their medical horizons, the Mayo brothers traveled to New York City, then the nation's leading medical center, to learn how to reduce the incidence of post-operative infections with vigorous hand-washing and scrupulously sterilized instruments.

In subsequent years, they learned new techniques by traveling to the Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore to observe master surgeons William Halsted and Howard Kelly and to many other leading hospitals in North America and Europe. By the early 1890s, they adopted William Halsted's practice of using rubber gloves during their operations and developed their own new methods of aseptic surgery.

Gradually, Will specialized in operations of the abdomen and pelvis, especially those surgical problems involving the gall bladder and the stomach, and Charlie focused on procedures of the head, neck, throat and brain.

Around the same time, the Sisters of St. Francis founded the St. Mary's Catholic Hospital in Rochester under the direction of

Mother Superior Alfred Moes. Impressed by the Mayos' surgical skills, she recruited them to base their practice at St. Mary's and this was the genesis of what is now known as the Mayo Clinic. As news of the Mayo brothers' operative successes spread, more and more patients flocked to Rochester and the surgical facilities at St. Mary's grew by leaps and bounds.

Beyond their operative acuity, the Mayos hit on the brilliant (and then revolutionary) idea of hiring other doctors, not only to help in the operating room but also those who specialized in other area in order to build a large group practice under one roof. By 1905, they had developed laboratories for both diagnostic purposes and conducting research.

Although other doctors referring patients to the Mayos often called the practice "the Mayo Clinic," it was not until 1914, with the opening of new building to house all their medical and surgical staff and employees, when the name was formally adopted.

In the years that followed, the Mayo Clinic transformed into the Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research, which later became the Mayo Graduate School of Medicine and is now part of the University of Minnesota. The brothers endowed it with \$2.5 million, a sum that represented their life savings.

Charlie and Will received some of the greatest honors in medicine. As brothers, they were so devoted to one another that in July 1939, only a few months after Charlie died in May 1939, Will passed away, too.

Perhaps the most endearing (and most likely apocryphal) anecdote about these two remarkable men involved a fabulously wealthy patient who approached Will with the headstrong query "Are you the head doctor here?" William Mayo responded without a hint of irony, "No, my brother is the head doctor. I'm the belly doctor."

**Editor's note:** *An earlier photo caption misidentified the Mayo brothers; Charles is on the left and William is on the right.*

By – **Dr. Howard Markel**

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