

**The Inaugural Karel B. Absolon
History of Medicine Lecture
Department of Surgery
Brody School of Medicine
East Carolina University**

PORTRAIT

Karel B. Absolon, M.D., Ph.D.

Our honored guest and speaker this evening is Dr. Karel B. Absolon. A 1952 graduate of the Yale University School of Medicine, Dr. Absolon has made important contributions both as a surgeon and as an historian of medicine. He worked with colleagues at the University of Minnesota including J. Bradley Aust and C. Walton Lillehei to perform pioneering coronary bypass surgery (1955) and the first human liver transplant (1965). He pioneered the use of colon grafts in patients suffering from epidermolysis bullosa (1970) and was the first to use synthetic grafts to achieve extrathoracic axillary-iliac bypass of the descending thoracic aorta (1975). In addition, Dr. Absolon has authored over 500 published articles and over twenty books.

Karel Absolon's interest in history was nurtured by the rich cultural environment of Brno, Czechoslovakia where he was born on March 21, 1926 to a family that boasts five generations of physicians. His father was a famous explorer of caves and the founder of Brno's anthropological museum. Dr. Absolon's own first publication was about caves and underground rivers in Czechoslovakia. Although he has received numerous certificates, medals, and awards, Dr. Absolon considers the most important document he has ever received to be a 1948 summons from the Soviet government ordering him to abandon his study of medicine and report for hard labor—an assignment intended to improve his attitude. In his determined quest for scientific truth, young Karel had argued to his biology teacher that Gregor Mendel's genetic theory was superior to that of T. Denisovich Lysenko, the geneticist favored by the Soviets. This summons was Karel's signal to bid his homeland farewell. He escaped Czechoslovakia and immigrated to America.

Once enrolled at Yale University, Dr. Absolon's interest in the history of medicine was re-kindled by Professor John F. Fulton. Later, in Minnesota, the prominent surgeon Owen H. Wangenstein prompted him to investigate the life and work of Theodore Billroth. This early research led to the production of Dr. Absolon's four-volume biography of Billroth, *The Surgeon's Surgeon* (1979). Dr. Absolon's intense study of Billroth has provided him numerous adventures. One of these led to his discovery of an important oil painting depicting Billroth in his surgery theater. He found the painting in a custodian's closet covered in dust. It is now prominently displayed in the library of the surgery clinic in Vienna.

In addition to his historical pursuit, Dr. Absolon is owner and editor of Kabel Publishers, a private publishing company in Rockville, Maryland.

Dr. Absolon's own library includes over 2,000 items relevant to medical history with concentrations in the areas of anatomy, surgery, genetics, microbiology, and military medicine. We are delighted that he has indicated his intention to donate this library, **The Karel B. Absolon History of Medicine Library**, to the History Collections of the William E. Laupus Health Sciences Library.

Dr. Absolon's current research is focused on Gregor Mendel and the history of genetics. Tonight he will present to us, "*In the Footpath of Gregor Mendel-The Founder of Genetics*". This lecture is the inaugural lecture of the annual **Karel B. Absolon History of Medicine Lecture Series** sponsored by the ECU Department of Surgery. It is a special privilege to begin this series today on March 21, 2001, the day of Dr. Absolon's seventy-fifth birthday.