

William James Elser

November 28, 1872 — July 6, 1952

Dr. William Elser's first appointment at Cornell University Medical College started in 1901, and he was closely associated with the College and the New York Hospital until his retirement in 1940. During this period he held several positions in pathology and bacteriology.

Dr. Elser's parents were of German descent and his scientific training was German. After graduating from Bellevue Hospital Medical College in 1895 and serving an internship, he spent the years from 1897 to 1901 in the medical schools of Berlin, Vienna and Graz. He often spoke of his training under Virchow. When he returned to New York in 1901 he became an assistant in Pathology; in 1904, Instructor in Bacteriology; from 1909 to 1932, Professor of Bacteriology and Immunology. In 1932 his title was changed to Professor of Applied Pathology and Bacteriology; and he held this non-teaching position until he became Emeritus Professor in 1940.

In the period before the Medical College moved to its new building in 1932, a large part of Dr. Elser's work was centered at the New York Hospital where he was appointed Assistant Pathologist in 1902 and Pathologist in 1905. Here he introduced the careful techniques he had learned in Germany and Austria.

Most of Elser's research and teaching were connected with bacteriology and immunology. His publications were few in number. In 1909 with Huntoon he issued a long monograph on meningitis and then continued on this same subject for many years. He never felt the work quite complete; and before he was ready to publish it some one else had written on the subject. It was the same with his important discovery of the method of preserving the original qualities of microorganisms by quick freezing and drying. After twenty-five years of labor he published in 1935 his article with Ruth Thomas and G. I. Steffen when it seemed that his method might be patented by others.

All of Dr. Elser's friends agree that he was an extreme perfectionist. He presented the curious phenomenon of a man whose recognition was hampered by the superabundance of a virtue. In this age when people rush into print he went to the other extreme, and received but little credit for years of hard labor and careful research.

Dr. Elser contributed his full share as a loyal American and as a public servant. He joined the New York Hospital Unit in World War I as Captain and left the service as Lieutenant Colonel. He served on the New York State Board of Medical Examiners. He belonged to many scientific societies.

Apart from his profession Elser had rather few outside interests. As a young man returning from Austria in 1901 he brought with him some of the first skis used in New York. Later in life he became interested in gardening at his home in Kent, Connecticut. He will be remembered most happily by his friends as the center of lively discussions at the luncheon table.

E. F. DuBois