



The Quest for Cortisone

By Thom Rooke

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In 1948, when “Mrs. G.” hospitalized with debilitating rheumatoid arthritis, became the first person to receive a mysterious new compound—*cortisone*—her physicians were awestruck by her transformation from enervated to energized. After eighteen years of biochemical research, the most intensively hunted biological agent of all time had finally been isolated, identified, synthesized, and put to the test. And it worked. But the discovery of a long-sought “magic bullet” came at an unanticipated cost in the form of strange side effects. This fascinating history recounts the discovery of cortisone and pulls the curtain back on the peculiar cast of characters responsible for its advent, including two enigmatic scientists, Edward Kendall and Philip Hench, who went on to receive the Nobel Prize. The book also explores the key role the Mayo Clinic played in fostering cortisone’s development, and looks at drugs that owe their heritage to the so-called “King of Steroids.”

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Editorial Review

Review

A must-read for anyone interested in the history of modern medicine, Rooke masterfully weaves together the life stories of characters as disparate as John F. Kennedy, Ernest Hemingway, Thomas Addison, and Nobel laureates in physics and medicine to tell the compelling story of how scientific progress is truly made, with a particular focus on the development of cortisone and related steroid therapeutics. Far from the “neat and tidy,” inexorable, and logical process most readers may assume underlie scientific breakthroughs, the reader will learn of the protagonists’ flashes of brilliance, but also of their mistakes, losses, and many disappointments overcome through bull-headed perseverance, hard work, and team work. I couldn’t put it down.

—David M. Harlan, Chief of Diabetes Division and Co-Director of the Diabetes Center of Excellence, UMass Memorial Health Care; William and Doris Krupp Professor of Medicine, University of Massachusetts Medical School

Rooke has accomplished the almost impossible: he has produced a scholarly account of the discovery of cortisone that reads like a novel. It is packed with fascinating people, who are connected by their passion for science, medicine, and the race for more than one Nobel Prize. This book is a fascinating blend of authoritative medical history and exciting story telling.

—Harvey Sparks, University Distinguished Professor of Physiology, Michigan State University

About the Author

Thom Rooke is the Krehbiel Professor of Vascular Medicine at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota.

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