

# A HISTORY IN ALL PAs' LIVES

By Stephen Cornell



DURHAM, N.C. — At the end of a plain hallway in a nondescript brick building a few hundred feet from the Duke University Medical Center, Reginald Carter, PhD, PA, is assembling treasures.

Carter, a 31-year veteran of the Duke University PA program, founded the Physician Assistant History Office (PAHx) in 2000 to help preserve the profession's not-so-long but rich history before it was too late.

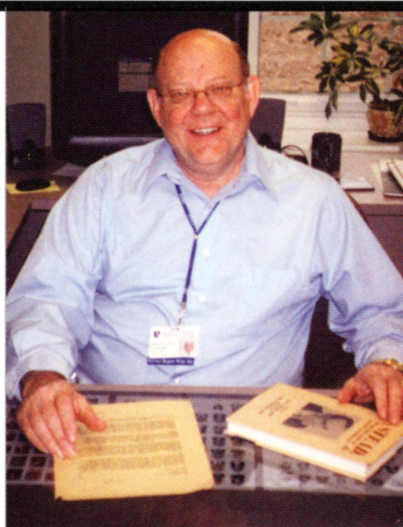
In less than two years, Carter's vision has begun to take shape at different places near the Duke campus and on the Internet. His offices are filled with PA artifacts.

In one envelope is an old stethoscope, the name "Stead" scratched onto the back of the bell. It once belonged to Eugene Stead, MD, the man often called the Father of the PA Profession—and a major benefactor of the history project.

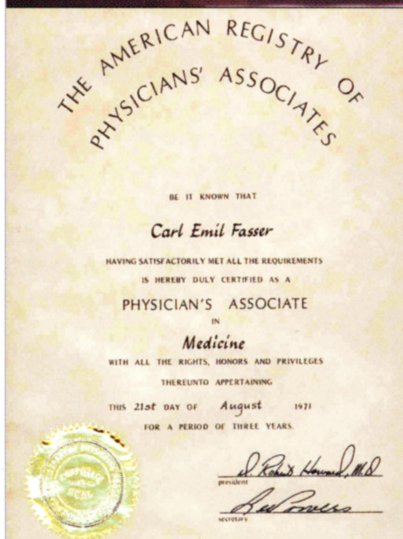
From another manila envelope, Carter dumps dozens of PA pins.

In a room next to his office, Carter keeps audiotapes of interviews he's conducted with many pioneers of the profession, such as Carl Fasser and Bill Stanhope. He has videotapes and films from various points in the profession's development and is working to have them digitized.

Another box holds syllabi from early PA conferences, including Carter's own program he kept from one of the four PA conferences held at Duke in the late 1960s—replete with his hand-written notes in the margins. He also has several copies of the Sept. 6, 1966, issue of *Look* magazine (Julie Andrews is on the cover) that featured an article on



**The modest brick building in which PA Reginald Carter's vision is taking shape is unremarkable. The results are anything but. They are, simply put, PA history.**



Items donated to the PA History Office include a stethoscope used by Eugene Stead, MD, and a 32-year-old certificate from the long-ago-vanished American Registry of Physicians' Associates.



Duke's original class of PA students.

One of the crown jewels of Carter's collection is a letter from Dr. Stead to Duke colleague Charles H. Frenzel, MD, dated April 21, 1964. The paper is yellowed and torn slightly at the top right-hand corner. In the correspondence, Dr. Stead describes his ideas for what would become the PA profession. If the letter doesn't represent the moment of conception of the PA profession, it has to be one of the earliest PA-related documents in existence.

J. Jeffrey Heinrich, EdD, PA-C, the first acting president of the Society for the Preservation of Physician Assistant History (SPPAHx), visited Carter in February, shortly after Carter dug up the Dr. Stead letter.

"I put it in (Heinrich's) hands and he almost cried," Carter says. "He said, 'How many people will ever get to hold this?'"

The PA history collection also includes more than 60 boxes of documents and artifacts at a renovated warehouse in Durham maintained by the Duke University Medical Center Archives.

"It's pretty remarkable that Reg has been at this only for a year and a half," Heinrich says. "The thing that's really exciting is to walk in and see that there are things in boxes actually being preserved."

Archivist Russell Koonts, assistant Charles Rutt and Carter have been combing through mountains of files for months, identifying things worth saving, cataloguing them and storing them away. Working on the project at the medical center library are special project manager Tom Clark and head of cataloguing Charlie Lackey, experts in cataloguing and digitizing historical collections.

## Reg Carter's Vision

At the center of the whole project is Carter, a fixture at the Duke PA program since the early 1970s.

"When I was ready to step down as program director, I said, what do I want to do with the rest of my career? My love of history and my love of PAs came together," he says.

Carter, who earned his PA degree

while on faculty at Duke, has helped educate hundreds of PAs, including a good chunk of the profession's movers and shakers. He can't walk 10 feet at a North Carolina Academy of Physician Assistants meeting without being greeted by a former student—more often than not, Carter says, they ask about his popular long-time assistant, Mildred.

Carter began the PA History Office at the department of community and family medicine at Duke in July 2001. He and Mildred started out by officially splitting time working for the history office and the PA program, and now both work full-time on PA history. Carter and a group of like-minded PAs incorporated the Society for the Preservation of PA History (SPAHx) in January 2002.

"We're blessed to have someone like Reg Carter working with the collection," says Heinrich, who is also the director of the PA program at George Washington University in Washington. "He's one thousand percent behind (the project), and he's someone who's lived much of (PA history). It's wonderful to have him."

Duke's department of community and family medicine, the American Academy of Physician Assistants, Dr. and Mrs. Stead and the state of North Carolina have contributed the bulk of the funds so far. To date, the PA History Office and the SPAHx have raised \$250,000 of the projected three-year costs of \$640,000.

Membership in the SPAHx is growing slowly, but Carter says there's a lot of interest in the project.

"People walk up to me at meetings and say, 'I'm so glad you're doing this,'" he says. "People say, 'I just threw away three boxes' or 'I'm from the military and I have this or I have that.' It's happened a hundred times."

While Carter has amassed a large collection of PA-related articles, he does-

## A Page of History

Here is an excerpt from Dr. Eugene Stead's April 21, 1964, letter to Duke colleague Charles A. Frenzel, MD:

**"During the next ten years I would like to have a hand in training men to be physician's assistants. This career would be open to men with a high-school or junior college degree, or to any person who was sponsored by a physician because of work already performed in a hospital, physician's office or laboratory."**

It ends:

**"I request that you call a meeting of the appropriate administrative personnel to discuss this program."**

And the rest is PA history.

n't necessarily encourage people to send him their personal mementos. He would like to see PA programs and state PA chapters develop their own historical collections and Web sites, which would be linked to the PAHx site.

His long-term goal is for anyone interested in PAs to be able to access documents, photos, video footage, oral interviews and other information on PA history on the Web.

Carter's vision for an easily accessible digitized Web history is inspired by the American Institute of Physics' massive Center for History of Physics Web site ([www.aip.org/history/](http://www.aip.org/history/)), which helps people access tens of thousands of digitized exhibits in all areas of physics.

### Not-So-Ancient History

Preserving the history of the PA profession is a unique challenge. Picture anthropologists sifting through tons of earth, looking for one or two clues to long-vanished civilization.

That's not at all what Carter's task is like.

Instead, imagine an anthropologist wading knee deep into a room filled with clay pots, arrowheads, old femurs and shattered ceramic plates, and you'll have a better understanding of his mission. There are still facts to run down and mysteries to unravel, but there is no shortage of leads.

The PA profession is less than 40 years old. Most of the "dinosaurs" of the profession are still striding across the health care landscape. Carter is searching for artifacts from the early days of the profession—such as a certificate from the American Registry of Physician Assistants recently offered by Fasser—but he also has to decide exactly what is worth the effort of saving.

"We have to be careful where we put our priorities and our attention right now," Carter says. "People say, 'Why aren't you doing the history of this or that?' We have to establish a baseline."

In this respect, the partnerships he's formed with professional archivists and librarians have been invaluable. The professionals provide expertise in organizing collections. Carter's knowledge of the PA profession helps them recognize which artifacts have historical significance.

"If we don't bring these things together today, we're not going to have them 50 years from now," Heinrich says. "That Stead letter is (an example). Who knows where that would be 25, 30, 40 years from now. It's likely we wouldn't have been able to capture that piece of history." □

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Visit the PA history Web site at [www.PAHx.org](http://www.PAHx.org).

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\* Bakircioglu ME, Hsu K, El-Sakka A, Sievert KD, Lin CS, Lue TF, *Journal of Urology* 2000 Nov;164(5):1798-801  
 • Wishnow P, *Townsend Letter for Doctors & Patients*, Nov; 2001: 70-74

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