

Amos Johnson, MD and Mr. Henry Lee “Buddy” Treadwell A Prototypical MD/PA Practice

By Reginald D. Carter, PhD, PA and Thomas Clark, MSLS

Although generally recognized as the originator of the physician assistant concept, Dr. Eugene A. Stead, Jr. is the first to note that the idea was not his exclusively. Prior to the development of the physician assistant program at Duke University in 1965, many physicians were training their own assistants on the job. Stead was aware particularly of one such proprietary trained assistant, Mr. Henry Lee “Buddy” Treadwell, who was trained by and worked with Dr. Amos Johnson in general practice in Garland, North Carolina. This relationship crystallized Stead’s vision of how a physician’s assistant could be used to help over-worked doctors deliver health care services.



Henry “Buddy” Treadwell

Treadwell was a young African American whom Johnson employed in 1940 as an office “orderly” to escort patients to examining rooms, prepare the rooms for the next patient, and clean laboratory equipment. Johnson gradually taught Treadwell to perform many of the routine tasks in his office, such as taking vital signs, suturing, conducting laboratory test, and developing x-ray films. By 1950, Treadwell was recognized as Johnson’s assistant and managed the practice while Johnson was away on trips to attend medical meetings and later to promote Family Medicine as a specialty. There were backup physicians in nearby communities available if Treadwell needed help. By 1960, Treadwell was accompanying patients to the Duke University Medical Center for diagnostic referrals and treatments. In additions, he was interacting with Duke University medical students sent to Garland for community-based clinical training. So his role was known within the Duke Medical Community.

A newspaper article written in 1967 by John J. Synon titled “Two Men: Two Souls” describes Dr. Johnson’s testimony for the prosecution at the court martial of Capt. Howard Levy. Dr. Levy was sentenced to 3 years in prison on May 10, 1967 for refusing to train Special Forces medical aidmen and for inspiring “disaffection” among enlisted men during the Viet Nam War. Johnson was called to defend the training of clinical personnel who were not doctors. According to the article, Johnson stated that he had employed a “Negro helper” in his office for 27 years and that “He is in a position of complete trust by me and my patients.” When asked if he would allow his medical aid man to work unsupervised, Johnson stated, “I’m here and he is home in my office working.” Johnson completed his testimony by saying that “The richest man in town would rather have Buddy sew him up than me because he can do it better than I can.”

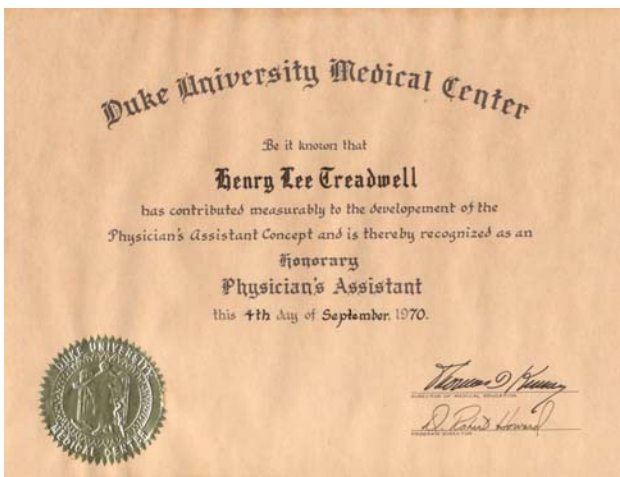
The May 1967 issue of Medical Economics contained an editorial followed by three articles on the topic of using non-doctors to do doctors’ work. One of the feature articles described the working relationship between Treadwell and Johnson. Johnson stated in the article that “He (Treadwell) works for me much as a resident in a hospital works for an attending.” Johnson, a past president of the American Academy of General Practice, indicated that he could not participate in activities of organized medicine without having someone coordinate patient care while he was away from the office. At Johnson’s request, Treadwell “routinely prepared and gave injections, inserted catheters, applied splints, took superficial sutures and removed stitches.” Johnson sent Treadwell to see certain patients and treat certain conditions in the patients’ homes, using the telephone as a means of consultation. “He’s saved me many a trip into the country that

would have broken up an entire morning's office work," confides Johnson. When asked about fees charged for Treadwell's services, Johnson indicated that when they both worked side-by-side in the office that he charged the patient "my regular fee – the same as if I'd done the work myself." When Johnson was away, the fee was reduced to half. When asked about liability, Johnson acknowledged that he was at risk, but that the risks were offset by the advantages. He indicated that the people in the community knew him and his assistant, some were third generation patients, and in a place like this, "suing their doctor is the furthest thing from their minds."



Johnson and Treadwell examine patient together in the office setting

In April 1969, James C. Mau, first administrator for Duke University PA Program, sent a letter to Robert Howard, first program director of the Duke University PA Program, saying that the PA Program should honor Henry Lee "Buddy" Treadwell at some upcoming event at Duke and invite his employer, Dr. Amos Johnson, to attend. Mau indicated in his letter to Howard that "I believe that he (Buddy) has played a very significant role in the evolution of this Program, for it was through Dr. Stead's contact with him and Dr. Johnson that nurtured the notion (PA concept)." Treadwell was recognized as a prototype PA and was made an Honorary Physician Assistant by the Duke PA program in 1970.



Dr. James Gifford, a medical historian from Duke University, interviewed and wrote several articles about Treadwell that were printed in the North Carolina Medical Journal and the Physician Assistant Journal. Gifford noted that "Johnson's success with Henry Treadwell helped shape Stead's prototype definition of the PA role and win federal support for PA training."

Certificate making Henry Lee "Buddy" Treadwell an honorary Physician Assistant, September, 1970

Epilogue:

Johnson served as a physician advisor to the Board of Directors of the American Academy of Physician Assistants in the early 1970's. When he died in 1975, Treadwell decided not to continue practicing as an assistant although he was offered jobs by physicians in surrounding communities. He did not attempt to take the National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistant certifying examination which was open to proprietary trained assistants in the 1970s. He had started a restaurant in Garland before Johnson's death and decided after 30 years to leave medical practice. Treadwell died on October 4, 1990 at the age of 68. Interestingly, Stead launched his PA program at Duke on October 4, 1965 – 25 years earlier to the day.

[Click Here for On-line Reference Materials.](#)

On-line Reference Materials:

[McClure, William W. A "Medic" in general practice. Medical Economics, 15 May 1967, pp.69-88. \(ID 296\)](#)

This issue of Medical Economics contains an editorial followed by three articles on the topic of using non-doctors to do doctors' work. One of the feature articles describes Henry "Buddy" Treadwell, a proprietary trained PA, working with Dr. Amos Johnson in general practice in Garland, NC.

[Buddy Treadwell - D. Robert Howard and James C. Mau Correspondence, 22 April 1969. \(ID 72\)](#)

This correspondence between James C. Mau, first administrator for Duke University PA Program, and D. Robert Howard, first program director of Duke University PA Program, discusses honoring Henry Lee "Buddy Treadwell at some upcoming event at Duke and inviting his employer, Dr. Amos Johnson, to attend. Mau indicates in his letter to Howard that "I believe that he (Buddy) has played a very significant role in the evolution of this Program, for it was through Dr. Stead's contact with him and Dr. Johnson that nurtured the notion (PA concept)."

[Interview with Henry Lee Treadwell, James F. Gifford, interviewer, 11 September 1985 \[audiotape and transcript\].](#)

This interview presents Mr. Henry Lee Treadwell of Garland, NC. Mr. Treadwell was for many years physician assistant to Dr. Amos Johnson. In that role he pioneered the role of Physician Assistant as it later crystallized in the formal training program of Duke University and subsequently at other centers.

[Gifford, JF, Jr. Prototype PA \(Amos Johnson and Henry Treadwell\). NCMJ. 1987;48\(11\):601-603.](#)

This article was based upon interviews conducted in 1985 with Mr. Henry Treadwell who served as Dr. Amos Johnson's informally trained physician's assistant in general practice between 1940 and 1975. The setting is Garland, a small rural community in eastern North Carolina. Mr. Treadwell served as a model for the physician assistant role that Dr. Eugene A. Stead, Jr., had in mind when he began the first formal educational program for physician assistants in 1965 at the Duke University Medical Center.

[Gifford JF Jr. The fate of America's prototype PA. Physician Assistant, 1987; 11\(7\):95-96.](#)

This is a companion article to the one appearing in the North Carolina Medical Journal in 1987 about Mr. Henry Lee "Buddy" Treadwell. Without formal training, Mr. Treadwell ends his practice as a proprietary trained physician assistant upon the death of his supervising physician, Dr. Amos Johnson in 1975. He had been with Dr. Johnson for over thirty years.

[Two Men: Two Souls \(Amos Johnson and Buddy Treadwell\), Newspaper Article, ca. 1967.](#)

This newspaper article appearing in 1967 in an unidentified publication, reportedly from Washington DC, was written by John J. Synon. The article describes the testimony given by Dr. Amos Johnson at the court-martial trial of Dr. Howard Levy, an Army physician, who refused to educate special force aid-men (medics) in protest of the Viet Nam War. Dr. Johnson is called to defend the practice of training non-physician personnel to assist with medical care. He describes the role of his assistant, Buddy Treadwell (misnamed Steadman in the article) in their general medicine practice in Garland, NC. This article was contributed to the PAHx history archival collection by Mr. Treadwell's daughter, Ms. Vivian Gunter. The original newspaper clipping remains in her possession.

[Henry Lee "Buddy" Treadwell: Artifact \[Photograph\], ca. 1965 \(PAHx, Henry L. Treadwell Collection\)](#)

This photograph of Henry Lee "Buddy" Treadwell dates from the mid-1960s. It was contributed to the PAHx history archival collection by Mr. Treadwell's daughter, Ms. Vivian Gunter. The original photograph remains in her possession.

[Henry Lee “Buddy” Treadwell: Artifact \[Certificate\], 4 September 1970 \(PAHx, Henry L. Treadwell Collection\)](#)

This certificate was awarded to Henry Lee “Buddy” Treadwell on September 4, 1970 by the Duke University Medical Center. It was given in recognition of his influence as a proprietary trained assistant in helping define the role of the Physician Assistant being educated at Duke University beginning in 1965. It was contributed to the PAHx history archival collection by Mr. Treadwell’s daughter, Ms. Vivian Gunter. The original certificate making Mr. Treadwell an honorary PA remains in her possession.