

Norman R. Barrett (1903-1979)

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Norman R. Barrett, an Australian, studied to become a physician and surgeon in Great Britain, where he worked practically all his life. He specialized in chest surgery in the United States. His particular interest was always the distal esophagus, of which he published more than 70 scientific articles, and is remembered mainly for the description of the esophagus lined by columnar epithelium, a condition later called Barrett's *esophagus*. It is an interesting peculiarity of the history of medicine that he is remembered by the name of a disease that, at first, he described wrong. He was listed as *the dean of thoracic surgery*.

He was born on May 16, 1903, in North Adelaide, Australia, and his parents were Catherine Hill Connor and Alfred Barrett. When he was ten, he moved to England with his family. He was educated in Cambridge at Eton College and Trinity College, did his medical and surgical training at St. Thomas Hospital in London, and graduated in 1928. In this institution, he specialized in surgery and worked there for the rest of his life.^(1,2)

In 1935, he traveled to the United States to the Mayo Clinic. His purpose was to specialize in gastrointestinal surgery, but Dr. Donald Balfour brought him closer to thoracic surgery. When he returned to St. Thomas Hospital in London, he devoted himself to pulmonary tuberculosis and pulmonary hydatidosis surgery and promoted the enucleation of cysts to prevent effusions and contamination (a procedure known as the *Barrett technique*).^(1,3)

In 1948, the thoracic surgery service was created, and he was appointed its first chief. In 1946, he wrote about the spontaneous rupture of the esophagus (Boerhaave syndrome) for the first edition of *Thorax Journal*, drawing on an original case of Morell Mackenzie and other reported cases and commented that the presentation of this condition is one of the most dramatic and most terrible situations in the field of surgery. His interest in the esophagus and the history of medicine were combined in this article, which seems to be described as a pleasure to read.^(1,3)

Having thoroughly studied all aspects of this condition, Barrett only had to wait for a suitable case. A year later, on March 7, 1947, he carried out the first successful repair of this condition.⁽³⁾

Within his work, he showed interest in various topics of thoracic pathology, in which he made original contributions, such as gastroesophageal reflux, pulmonary hydatid cyst surgery, tumors of the chest wall, and the use of drains. He was the one who promoted Heller's operation for achalasia in England, which was accepted there before other countries.⁽²⁻⁴⁾ Some of Barrett's most important works were directed to the method for the cytological examination of sputum in the diagnosis of lung neoplasms.⁽²⁾

