Healing a Wounded Heart: Daniel Hale Williams
by William Orem

Chicago, 1893, a quiet summer evening—a man, his face clenched in agony, his shirt stained with blood, stumbles through the doors of Provident Hospital.

Fortunately for the wounded man, who was black, this hospital gave care to patients of any color—which was more than could be said of many of the hospitals in the city, indeed, in the whole United States.

Provident Hospital had been founded in 1891 by Dr. Daniel Hale Williams. Williams himself had come a long way before founding the hospital. He was born in Pennsylvania in 1856, before the Civil War, at a time when almost four million African Americans in the United States were still slaves. Daniel’s parents, however, were not slaves. His father owned a barbershop. As a boy, Daniel started to learn the shoemaking trade. Later, he worked in barbershops as well. All the while, he studied hard and read constantly in order to learn all that he could.

As a young man, Daniel Hale Williams worked as an apprentice to a well-respected surgeon, Dr. Henry Palmer. This apprenticeship prepared Williams to enter Chicago Medical School, one of the best medical schools in the nation at the time. After three years of hard work, Williams graduated with his M.D. degree in 1883.

When Dr. Williams set up his medical practice, there were only three other black doctors in Chicago. He worked at the South Side Dispensary, where he was often called upon to make use of his skills in surgery. He also provided medical care for children at a nearby orphanage and taught anatomy at the medical college where he had studied.

Wherever he looked, Dr. Williams saw few opportunities for African Americans to enter medical professions. He also saw that black people were sometimes refused medical care, or did not receive the same quality of care available to white people. That is why, when the Reverend Louis Reynolds came to him with an idea, Dr. Williams saw the wisdom of it. They would start their own hospital—a place where black people could get the same quality treatment as white people. The hospital would also serve as a training school for nurses—a goal dear to the heart of Reverend Reynolds, whose sister wanted to become a nurse but had been rejected from existing schools simply because she was black.

clenched: held tightly
M.D.: Medicinae Doctor (Latin) = Doctor of Medicine

dispensary: a place where medicine or medical treatment is given out
anatomy: the scientific study of the parts and structures of living things
With support from other clergymen, wealthy donors, and community residents, Provident Hospital opened its doors in May of 1891. It gave patients equal access to quality care, and doctors and nurses equal access to quality training. In fact, Provident was the first hospital in the United States in which black and white doctors worked together to care for all patients, regardless of race.

On the summer night that the man with the knife wound stumbled into Provident Hospital, Dr. Williams was called in. The doctor reassured the patient with his calm, dignified manner. Williams was confident that he could help. But then he saw the wound—it went deep into the chest, perhaps into the heart.

At this time, the X-ray machine had not been invented, so there was no way for Dr. Williams to look inside the patient to determine the extent of the injury. No way, that is, except to open the man’s chest and look right into it.

Open the chest? In 1893, doctors operated on torn muscles, on broken bones, even on serious knife wounds to other parts of the body. But they did not perform heart surgery. Many doctors argued that it was too dangerous; they said a surgeon would be foolish even to try such a thing.

Yes, it was dangerous. But Daniel Hale Williams was not foolish—on the contrary, he was very careful. He knew that, unless he took this risk, the patient was almost sure to die.

With several other doctors observing and assisting, Dr. Williams started the operation. He cut into the man’s chest. He cut even deeper. He examined the depth of the stab wound. He found and repaired a torn blood vessel. He stitched up the pericardium, a fluid-filled bag that surrounds the heart. He very carefully cleaned the wound and the chest cavity, to make sure that no infection set in. Then he stitched closed the man’s chest, again taking great care to keep everything as antiseptic as he could.

The surgery was a success. The wounded man lived, not only for the rest of that day, or the rest of that week, but for decades afterward. Dr. Williams had given him back his life. In the process, he became the first doctor to perform successful heart surgery.

Dr. Williams wasn’t trying to become a hero on that evening in 1893, nor could he have known he was going to become famous for his accomplishment. But the newspapers let the world know, in dramatic headlines that read, “SEWED UP HIS HEART!”

Dr. Williams went on to become chief surgeon at the Freedman’s Hospital in Washington, D.C. He reorganized the hospital and made it into a model of high quality medical care.

Daniel Hale Williams was successful in many ways. He worked hard to become a doctor at a time when the doors of the medical profession were generally closed to African Americans. He remained committed to his belief that all people deserve quality health care. And as a surgeon, he was bold enough to take risks but careful enough to ensure the safety of his patients.