Williams, Daniel Hale


Williams graduated from Chicago Medical College in 1883. He served as surgeon for the South Side Dispensary (1884-92) and physician for the Protestant Orphan Asylum (1884-93). In response to the lack of opportunity for blacks in the medical professions, he founded (1891) the nation's first interracial hospital, Provident, to provide training for black interns and the first school for black nurses in the United States. He was a surgeon at Provident (1892-93, 1898-1912) and surgeon in chief of Freedmen's Hospital, Washington, D.C. (1894-98), where he established another school for black nurses.

It was at Provident Hospital that Williams performed daring heart surgery on July 10, 1893. Although contemporary medical opinion disapproved of surgical treatment of heart wounds, Williams opened the patient's thoracic cavity without aid of blood transfusions or modern anesthetics and antibiotics. During the surgery he examined the heart, sutured a wound of the pericardium (the sac surrounding the heart), and closed the chest. The patient lived at least 20 years following the surgery. Williams' procedure is cited as the first recorded repair of the pericardium; some sources, however, cite a similar operation performed by H.C. Dalton of St. Louis in 1891.

Williams later served on the staffs of Cook County Hospital (1903-09) and St. Luke's Hospital (1912-31), both in Chicago. From 1899 he was professor of clinical surgery at Meharry Medical College in Nashville, Tenn., and was a member of the Illinois State Board of Health (1889-91). He published several articles on surgery in medical journals. Williams became the only black charter member of the American College of Surgeons in 1913.