

Dr. Roy J. Heffernan Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 11/27/1964
Administrative Information

Creator: Dr. Roy J. Heffernan

Interviewer: Ed Martin

Date of Interview: November 27, 1964

Place of Interview: Boston, Massachusetts

Length: 6 pages

Biographical Note

Heffernan was the Kennedy family doctor in Boston, Massachusetts. In this interview Heffernan discusses his work as the Kennedy family doctor, including delivering several of the family's children and operating on Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy.

Access

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NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS SERVICE

Gift of Personal Statement

By

Roy J. Nefferman MKJ

to the

John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library

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Signed

Roy J. Nefferman MKJ

Date

March 20, 1968

Accepted

James B. Rhoads

Acting

Archivist of the United States

Date

April 16, 1968

APPENDIX A

GIFT OF PERSONAL STATEMENT

By Roy J. Heffernan, M.D.

to the

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Signed

Roy J. Heffernan M.D.

Date

7/24/70

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James B. Rhoads
Archivist of the United States

Date

Aug. 10, 1970

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James B. Rhoads
Archivist of the United States

Aug. 10, 1970

Oral History Interview

with

Dr. Roy Heffernan

November 27, 1964
Boston, Massachusetts

By Ed Martin

For the John F. Kennedy Library

MARTIN: Doctor, your first association with the Kennedy family goes back to when?

HEFFERNAN: It goes back several years to when Mrs. Robert Kennedy consulted me. She was having her fifth baby, I believe, and she was summering down at Cape Cod at the Kennedy house there. I looked after her during the early part of the summer and then delivered her baby,

And then I've taken care of Mrs. Eunice Shriver. I delivered two of her babies, and I operated on her. I took care of Mrs. Stephen Smith, delivered one of her babies and did an operation on her. I had the great privilege of operating on President Kennedy's mother, Mrs. Joseph Kennedy.

MARTIN: When was that, Doctor?

HEFFERNAN: That was three years ago, and the President called me that evening. It was amusing in a way. The phone started ringing about 9 o'clock from various parts of the country, United Press and reporters here and there, you know, wanting to know the details. Word had just leaked out that I was operating on the President's mother, and I didn't mind very much because I knew it was necessary for the reporters to do this. I anticipated that they might call me so I had a conference with Mrs. Kennedy and asked her what I should tell the reporters. Her difficulty was a gynecological condition, and it was something that you wouldn't want spread all over the newspapers, you know. But she very shrewdly said, "Well, Doctor, if you don't tell them something, they'll make something up." So we got our heads together, and we decided to call the difficulty a "pelvic hernia" and the newspapers accepted this. It was something of an euphemism really, but she did have a form of a pelvic hernia. In any event, the night before, as I said, I got all these telephone calls, but I was operating on her at 8 o'clock. I wanted to get a good night's sleep, and I had planned to go to bed about 10 or 10:30, but the phone was still going after 10:30. And when it rang about twenty of 11, Mrs. Heffernan became very annoyed and said, "I'm going to give them a piece of my mind." She took the phone, and she was just going to censure the caller when someone said, "Just a moment, this is the White House, President Kennedy is calling." She decided not to call him down.

I took the phone, and he wanted to know how his mother was, and I assured him that it was not serious. And he said, "Is it necessary for me to come to Boston?" I said, "Certainly not, sir, it's not necessary." He said, "Is she having pain?" And I said, "No, moderate discomfort, but no pain." And he asked about the danger, and I said, "Of course, there is some danger to every surgical procedure." But I didn't anticipate any trouble, and I knew how busy he was, and I saw no necessity for his coming to Boston. I told him that I would phone him as soon as I finished operating.

The operation went well, and the next morning I called him. He was waiting for my call and was delighted to hear

that his mother was well and all right. And she did make a good recovery. My big difficulty was keeping her in the hospital long enough for her to make a real complete recovery. She wanted to hop the plane for Palm Beach four or five days after I operated on her. Actually, I think she did leave for the Ritz Hotel in Boston on the sixth day, and she said she was taking a plane the following day, but I learned later that she took the plane that afternoon for Palm Beach, but she suffered no ill effects from it.

MARTIN: How would you describe her as a patient, Doctor?

HEFFERNAN: She was one of the finest patients I have ever had, very uncomplaining, very cordial and cooperative. And of course, she was the President's mother, and I felt somewhat deferential toward her, but she didn't indicate in the slightest way that she was a person of any more importance than any of my patients. She gave me no trouble whatsoever. I was delighted to take care of her, not because of who she was but because of her fine character and her fine personality. It was a pleasure to know her and to take care of her. I mean that very sincerely.

MARTIN: Was there another occasion when the President contacted you, Doctor?

HEFFERNAN: Yes, he called me from New York when he was a Senator and said that he was concerned because Mrs. Kennedy was pregnant again, and the doctors had some discussion as to whether the baby should be born naturally or should be born by Caesarean, and asked my opinion. I told him there were two schools of thought in this condition. Some obstetricians felt that if a Caesarean was done once, that you should always do one. And others felt that if the pelvis was ample and there was a so-called non-pelvic indication for the first Caesarean and no obstruction to the birth in any way, that it was perfectly good and proper to allow the patient to go into labor the second time and have the baby naturally. I said, "Actually, I think the best way is to have Mrs. Kennedy in the hands of a good, capable obstetrician, which I am sure you are doing, and be governed by

his advice in the matter." And he laughed and said, "Well, of course we'll do that, but there was a little discussion about it, and I just thought I'd call you and ask you about it."

The next time he phoned me was on that day, a Wednesday, and I happened to be playing golf. And I was called to the phone, and he called from down the Cape. And his words, as I remember, were these: he said, "Doctor, Jackie has just had a little boy, and he isn't doing well. He has some respiratory difficulty." Now he said, "Would you kindly get the best man in Boston to deal with this sort of situation, and I'll have a plane at the Logan Airport waiting for him, and he can come right down here. I would be grateful if you would do this." I said, "I'll do it right away, and I'll call you right back."

I thought rather than call various pediatricians, and there might be some delay in doing this, I'd call the Children's Hospital, I got the chief of staff and told him what the difficulty was, and immediately he got to work on the matter and called a Dr. Rohrbaugh, who he said was particularly expert in dealing with respiratory difficulties in premature babies. He phoned me back and told me that Dr. Rohrbaugh was on his way to Logan Airport. I called the President and told him that. And in view of the fact that the little baby did, unfortunately, succumb later, I was glad, and I am sure everyone concerned was very glad, that at least it had the facilities of the finest hospital for children in the world, and it had the advantages of that high-pressure chamber, which was new for that condition. But it just wasn't God's will that it should survive and live, but at least the family was grateful, and we all were, that everything possible was done for the little baby.

MARTIN: Did you go over to the hospital at that time, Doctor?

HEFFERNAN: I went, but I didn't go near the baby because it was under great protection at that time. But I wanted to get a report from those taking care of it because, of course, I was vitally concerned in its welfare.

MARTIN: Doctor, President Kennedy took the loss of this

child quite strongly. Do you have any feelings as to why he would take this as seriously as he did?

HEFFERNAN: Well, of course, the loss of a little baby is always a tragic event to its parents, but I think it would be particularly so with the President. Knowing his family as I do, I know that they love children very, very much. They all want to have large families. They love their children very, very dearly. Their family life is of tremendous importance to them. I think he loved his wife very dearly, and he realized what a disappointment this was to her. And partly on that account and partly because of his great love for children, he felt the loss of this baby very, very deeply.

MARTIN: Now also, Doctor, did you care for any of the other Kennedy girls?

HEFFERNAN: Yes indeed. I had the great pleasure of taking care of Senator [Edward M.] Ted Kennedy's wife. I delivered her second baby. Of course, they lived in Boston for some time, and she has been in to see me on various occasions, during her pregnancy and other times for check-ups, so that I have had the pleasure of taking care of her.

MARTIN: You know, Doctor, generally there has been a source of amazement to a great many people as to the health and vigor of the entire Kennedy family, the girls as well as the boys. Is there any way you can explain why they, more than any other family, seem to have such drive, such energy, and such apparent good health?

HEFFERNAN: Well, I can only say that they are very fortunate in the ancestral genes that have come down to them from their progenitors in the Emerald Isle. They have been the right quality and the right quantity and have imbued them with plenty of pep and zeal and ambition and have given them all not only tremendous physical properties, but they all seem to be thoroughly dedicated to helping other people in every possible way, so much so that they use their time and energy almost too much, at times, to benefit other people. I think they are wonderful people, and it is a privilege to know them.

MARTIN: Doctor, in your recollections of your association with Mrs. Kennedy do you ever recall her discussing the problem of a child that was mentally retarded?

HEFFERNAN: Yes, I do. I think on the third or fourth day after her operation I sat down and talked with her for a while, and we got to speaking about retarded children. She spoke about the little girl that she and her husband had and how astounded they were and chagrined when they found that this little child was a retarded child. She said, "Really, I don't think it is immodest of me to say that my other children all seemed brilliant," as they were, and she said, "We couldn't understand how this could happen to us." Then she said, "Doctor, we found there was quite a problem in connection with taking care of this little girl. We didn't know where to turn for proper advice. Some people said we should send her to an institution; some said we should keep her at home; some said she should have special teaching and training; and yet there was no consensus in this matter and no real authority to whom we could turn for the best possible advice. It made us realize, and of course we had ample means to give the child any care that might be necessary, it made us realize what a tremendous problem it must be for poor people or people of moderate means faced with the same problem." She said, "Doctor, you know, I think Almighty God sent this little girl to us so we would become interested in this problem and do something about it, and as you know, we are trying to do something about it at this time."