

# Senator Royal Copeland

The medical and political career of a homeopathic physician



Photo courtesy U.S. Senate Historical Office.

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Physicians can influence society in many ways, including through public policy and legislation.<sup>1</sup> U.S. Senator William Frist noted that fifty-one practicing physicians (including himself) have served in the U.S. Senate, although the number has declined dramatically over the decades, leading Frist to observe that physicians have been gross under-achievers on a social scale. Of these fifty-one, Frist highlighted three for their “profound and unique influence . . . on public policy.”<sup>2p110</sup> Senator Latham Mitchill (1764–1831) was upheld as “a true polymath”<sup>2p111</sup> whose “life was a prime example of the limitless contributions that a doctor can make to a society . . . formulating thoughtful public health policy.”<sup>2p113</sup> Jacob Gallinger (1837–1918) and Royal Copeland (1868–1938) were the other two senator-physicians singled out. Gallinger was described as “an impressive model for future physician-legislators . . . and demonstrates the unique contributions that physicians can make in the policy arena, by improving individual, communal, and national healthcare.”<sup>2p114</sup> Copeland spearheaded the 1938 Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act, a landmark event in the regulation of food, drug, and cosmetic products, as well as remaining the centerpiece of drug regulation for some fifty years.<sup>2</sup> Copeland’s efforts were described as a “tremendous example of the enduring policy that can result from physician involvement in national politics”<sup>2p115</sup> and “a shining example of what a physician-statesman can accomplish in the field of public health.”<sup>2p114</sup> Curiously, two of these three influential senator-physicians were practicing homeopathic doctors, one of whom, Royal Copeland, dedicated his entire career in medicine and politics to the furtherance of homeopathy in the United States.

## Homeopathy— let like be treated by like



Homeopathy (from the Greek words “homoios”—“similar,” and “pathos”—“suffering”) is a system of medicine introduced in the late eighteenth century by the German physician Samuel Hahnemann (1755–1843). Within fifty years of its introduction, homeopathy had spread throughout Europe, Russia, and North and South America, and has subsequently gained a strong foothold in India. Homeopathy is based on the principle that the treatment best suited for a patient’s illness or symptoms is capable of inducing the same set of symptoms when taken by healthy subjects. As an example, the effects of peeling an onion are very similar to the symptoms of an acute upper respiratory infection, and homeopaths use extracts from *Allium cepa* (the red onion) in very dilute form to treat coryza. The principle is: Let like be treated by like. Homeopaths focus not only on making a diagnosis but also on the study of the patient as a whole individual, with emphasis on his or her particular reactions to the symptoms of the illness. Homeopathic treatment thus consists in both removal of symptoms and the full restoration of the patient’s physical, mental, and spiritual well-being.<sup>3</sup> Although homeopathy flourished in North America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the ascendancy of evidence-based pathophysiology and advanced pharmacologic therapy in allopathic medicine contributed to a profound decline in the United States by the mid-twentieth century.<sup>4</sup>

Hans Burch Gram and Constantin Hering introduced homeopathy into the United States between 1820 and 1830, and were major figures behind its subsequent spread across the nation such that, by the late nineteenth century, approximately ten percent of all practicing doctors were homeopaths and over twenty homeopathic medical schools were in

existence. Many of these were attached to major universities. Homeopathic training embraced all the main elements of an orthodox medical training, with additional components unique to homeopathy, i.e., materia medica, selection of remedies, and emphasis, after assessment, on the whole person, including his or her constitution, habits, emotional health, and what it is that distinguishes each individual so that treatment could be based on the particular (i.e., the patient's unique features) rather than the general (i.e., the diagnosis). A good idea of the extent to which a homeopathically trained doctor was medically qualified is illustrated by the fact that of sixty-three courses in the curriculum of the New York Homœopathic Medical College in 1912 only eight were specific to homeopathy, all the others being courses that would have been offered at most mainstream medical schools.<sup>5p119</sup> Homeopathic subspecialties prospered in fields such as psychiatry, obstetrics, otolaryngology, and ophthalmology. At least seven homeopathic mental asylums were in existence as late as 1941 and a homeopathic textbook on mental illness was well read by the homeopathic community.<sup>6,7</sup> Homeopathy never had any doctrinal quarrels about the importance of surgery as a part of medical practice, and it was not uncommon for homeopaths to practice surgery after being fully trained by the standards of the time. A thriving Homœopathic Ophthalmological, Otolological, and Laryngological Society published its own journal.

### Royal Copeland's view: Homeopathy is a medical subspecialty



Royal Copeland was born into a Methodist family and raised in Dexter, Michigan, where his father was in the lumber business. By the time he graduated from high school, Copeland knew that he wanted to become a physician, but lacking the financial means to achieve this goal, worked as a teacher for a period of time. Simultaneously, Copeland attached himself as an extern to the local homeopathic family practitioner, Dr. Edgar Chase, and thus acquired valuable formative experiences, including acceptance of the laws of homeopathy, which he saw as "one of the great laws of nature, as fixed as the law of gravitation."<sup>5p27</sup> After his father sold some land, Copeland was able to enter medical school at the University of Michigan in 1887. In 1889 he graduated with a degree in homeopathic medicine. Unlike many of his homeopathic colleagues, who regarded homeopathy as an alternative sect in rivalry to allopathy, Copeland viewed homeopathy as a medical subspecialty, differing principally in its therapeutic

practices. He always remained eager to embrace the advances of modern medicine, teaching his homeopathic colleagues to do likewise. Seeing the destructive in-fighting that characterized much of the homeopathic community, Copeland, as did Osler later in 1905 with allopathic physicians in his farewell address to the medical profession of the United States,<sup>8pp434-35</sup> would constantly entreat his colleagues to work together with greater unity of purpose, asking, "Can we not bury our theoretical differences, and meet on a common ground?"<sup>5p50</sup>

Based on the advice of one of his teachers, Royal Copeland decided to train in ophthalmology. In 1889, he was appointed house surgeon at the University of Michigan hospital, working under Dr. H. L. Oberz, who was dean of the Medical School and professor of Surgery.

### An innate politician . . . future mayor of Ann Arbor



Copeland's view was that the doctor was ideally placed to create social change. As a young man he became involved in politics, commenting, "I am sure our country would be better if more men of the medical profession entered the field of politics."<sup>5p45</sup> In 1891, at the age of twenty-three, Copeland joined the Saginaw Valley Homœopathic Society and soon was elected its president. Later he was elected secretary of the 1400-member Michigan Homeopathic Medical Society. Copeland was imbued with a strong sense of mission to promote the cause of homeopathy. He pursued this goal with a religious and militant zeal. In his presidential address to the Saginaw society, for example, he spoke of the need to "clothe ourselves in the panoply of war and go forth to more aggressive battle than has yet been recorded in all our splendid history."<sup>5p42</sup> In his presidential address to the Homœopathic Medical Society of Michigan, he reminded his audience that homeopathy "has much missionary labor yet to perform."<sup>5p61</sup>

In 1892 at the age of twenty-four, Copeland joined the Bay City Republican party, working for the reelection of President Grover Cleveland, and shortly afterwards campaigned successfully to serve on the local Board of Pension Examiners, the body that handled charity cases. The next year he founded the successful Christian Union, a society dedicated to resisting the activities of an extreme anti-Catholic organization that had formed a presence in Saginaw. Copeland himself was deeply religious, reading the Bible for several hours a day as a young man, and serving as president of the Methodist Epworth League in Bay City. Many in his home town expected him

to become a minister. He referred to doctors as “shepherds,” patients as “flocks,” and said of homeopathy, “if homeopathy were not of God, that is, if it were not in harmony with the laws of nature, it would have come to naught.”<sup>5p43</sup>

Copeland extended his political horizons and in 1900 ran successfully for election as mayor of Ann Arbor, an office he held until 1903. He then campaigned unsuccessfully for a Congressional seat. On the medical front, Copeland maintained a private practice, authored a medical textbook, *Refraction*, and gained a reputation for his skill in treating cataracts, about which he authored a paper during his mayoral term. Copeland became head of the eye and ear section of the American Institute of Homœopathy (AIH) in 1900, and in 1904 was elected president of the American Homœopathic Ophthalmological, Otological, and Laryngological Society. In local affairs, Copeland became a parks commissioner in Ann Arbor and trustee of the board of education and the tuberculosis board. Copeland was actively involved in the issues affecting homeopathy and gave service to the AIH as president in 1907.

One controversy of the time concerned the problems of adulteration and misbranding of medicines, issues that came before the U.S. Congress on a number of occasions, leading to passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act in 1906, which recognized the U.S. Pharmacopeia and National Formulary as official drug standards. In this same year Copeland’s proposal to adopt a uniform scale of notation for homeopathic medicines, read at the Homœopathic World Congress, was adopted, and homeopaths initiated efforts to standardize measurements used in their drug preparations.<sup>9</sup> Because homeopathic medicines and the Homeopathic Pharmacopeia of the United States (HPUS) had been excluded from recognition, it became a matter of great importance for homeopaths that the law should also recognize their products. In furtherance of this task, Senator Jacob Gallinger worked tirelessly but unsuccessfully to include the HPUS in legislation. The AIH Pharmacopeia Committee turned to Copeland for help in rallying to the cause, and to ensure that the homeopathic community not be discriminated against in the enforcement of this law. No immediate results were forthcoming, and at times the AIH wondered if Copeland had abandoned them in the course of his political career. However, he never forgot this charge.

In 1908 Copeland made an abrupt career change that confounded his colleagues in Michigan when he accepted a position as dean of the New York Homœopathic Medical School. His acceptance became widely known before he had said anything to his employer, leaving the University of Michigan in an embarrassing position, but in due course he gave notice of resignation. This career move was prompted in large part by Copeland’s desire to proselytize for homeopathy on a broader stage. New York presented greater opportunity than the rural Midwest. Copeland said that New York Homœopathic had “more privileges, more opportunities to master practical medicine, a broader and more comprehensive education than can be found in any other college, allopathic or homeopathic, on this continent.”<sup>5p92</sup>

For the next ten years, Dean Copeland provided effective leadership to the New York Homœopathic Medical College and its teaching affiliate, Flower Hospital. He applied himself with seemingly inexhaustible energy and enthusiasm to the many challenges that he faced. Perhaps the highest of these hurdles was the Flexner Report on American medical education, particularly the criticisms of the substandard training offered at most homeopathic medical schools. Flexner concluded that the number of U.S. medical schools should be reduced from 155 to thirty-one. Ninety-four stayed in business, but the number of homeopathic schools declined from approximately twenty to six between 1910 and 1918. Three inspections of New York Homeopathic Medical College in 1911 and 1914 by the American Medical Association and that New York State Board of Charities found deficiencies in space, equipment, library resources, and building safety, and the school was ultimately downgraded from level A to level B. In 1912, however, Copeland was well pleased that the New York Commissioner of Education praised the school for a curriculum exceeding the standards of the AMA Council of Education. Copeland had many ambitions for the college, but one of his most prized goals—to establish a university affiliation with the medical school—went unrealized. In keeping with national trends for homeopathic schools, student enrollment declined sharply during the World War I years. Nonetheless, the school remained operational until 1938, one of the last homeopathic medical schools to keep its doors open. It is a tribute to Copeland’s skills that the college was one of only two homeopathic schools that remained active after the Flexner Report.

In addition to his activities as an academic administrator, Copeland’s clinical contributions deserve further mention. Teaching and practice remained important to Dean Copeland, and he continued to see emergency room cases. In 1910 the *New York Herald* twice reported major surgical feats performed by Copeland: “EYE BALL SLASHED, HIS SIGHT IS SAVED” and “CORNEA GRAFTING FIRST PERFORMED IN HOSPITAL HERE,” reporting the first corneal transplant performed in the United States.<sup>5pp115–16</sup> In 1913 Copeland became a Fellow

## Off to New York— Homeopathy on a broader stage



## Senator Royal Copeland

of the American College of Surgeons in recognition of his distinguished contributions. Copeland continued to practice homeopathy, often using such remedies as calendula for eye problems, or bryonia for coughs and inflammation.<sup>5p152</sup>

Copeland—an able ophthalmologist, wartime doctor, and NYC Health Commissioner



During World War I, Copeland was instrumental in establishing the first wartime army base homeopathic medical unit, known as United States General Hospital No. 5. The legitimacy of homeopathy as a form of wartime medical care had been denied in previous U.S. military conflicts, most notably the Civil War, and Copeland had to overcome considerable opposition from government authorities who continued to remain skeptical of homeopathy. As a result of his unrelenting efforts, homeopathy received governmental recognition and “rose nobly to its privileges and opportunity.”<sup>10</sup>

In 1918, Copeland resigned as dean of the New York Homœopathic College, accepting the position of Health Commissioner for New York City. In this new capacity he served with distinction to improve the city’s health systems, double its milk consumption, lower the infant mortality rate, and contain the “Spanish Flu” outbreak. In 1920 Copeland was invited to write a syndicated health column for the Newspaper Feature Service. He had no hesitation in accepting, saying that “It’s time to do away with the mystery of medicine, the people should be informed. . . . I have the privilege of speaking every day through the columns of the news.”<sup>5p160</sup> Copeland’s column,

which continued until the time of his death, had 11 million readers, generated approximately 10,000 letters a week to his office, and gave rise to his book, *The Health Book*. Copeland may have been one of the first doctors to popularize medicine for the general public through regular use of the media.

In 1922, William Randolph Hearst’s plan to run for the U.S. Senate was blocked by New York Governor Alfred Smith, with whom Hearst had been feuding. Copeland was put forth as a compromise candidate, and campaigned for the Senate with Franklin D. Roosevelt as his manager. Against the expectations of many, he defeated the Republican incumbent. There is no doubt that his fame from radio addresses and public speeches, his newspaper column, and visibility in the Methodist church around the state had all given him a boost with voters.

An active senator, supported by FDR, with a strong agenda for public health



Copeland remained in the U.S. Senate for the rest of his life, being re-elected twice. He twice chaired the Committees on Rules and Commerce, and ran unsuccessfully for mayor of New York in 1937. During his senatorial career, he was seen as an effective lawmaker in the areas of immigration, farming, tax reform, probation, and court reform, but his heart was most deeply committed to health promotion and legislation. Copeland sponsored or co-sponsored a number of bills. The first, introduced in 1924, was designed to prevent the consumer from falling prey to fake vaccines and sera. The same year, he introduced a bill for establishing a bureau of medical research in the government. Other initiatives Copeland sponsored included an effort to appoint a scientist in the Library of Congress, and a rather strange proposal for psychologists to measure the brain capacity of congressmen for “anthropological psycho-physical and statistical examinations.”<sup>5p188</sup> None of these bills became law, but by 1926 Copeland knew that his principal mission in the Senate must be to strengthen the 1906 Pure Food and Drug Act, protect the consumer, and “hitch his cart” to the star of homeopathy.<sup>5p187</sup> Copeland was instrumental in installing the Senate’s first air conditioning system in 1929, in large part because of his discovery that unhealthy

Senator Royal Copeland and aviatrix Amelia Earhart Putnam before the Senate Aircraft Accident Committee, May 1, 1936.

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conditions in the building had contributed to the deaths of thirty-four senators over a twelve-year period.

At the end of the nineteenth century, consumers had virtually no protection against adulterated or mislabeled drugs, and the few regulatory provisions in existence varied from state to state. The 1906 Pure Food and Drugs Act sought to rectify some of the deficiencies by prohibiting interstate commerce in adulterated or misbranded drugs, and requiring that dangerous substances (e.g., drugs of addiction) must be labeled. The act was an important milestone, but fell short of its intended purpose since drug companies were not required to provide drug ingredients on the label, directions for use, or warnings about potential hazards, and could still make unsubstantiated therapeutic claims. From the perspective of homeopathy, the act fell short by excluding the HPUS from the official standards. Apart from one minor amendment to the original act in 1912, no further legislation took effect until 1938. One abortive attempt was made by Senator Rexford Tugwell in 1933, but it was defeated by industry lobbying.<sup>9</sup>

## Major legislation: The 1938 Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act



Copeland undertook revision of the unpopular Tugwell bill and, after several arduous years of “hen scratching,”<sup>9</sup>—speeded at the end by the tragic sulfanilamide deaths caused by the toxic effects of ethylene glycol<sup>11</sup>—it passed Congress. The 1938 Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act required manufacturers to demonstrate the safety of drugs before they could be approved, to properly label drugs with directions for safe use, and prohibited them from making unsubstantiated therapeutic claims. The act also provided oversight for food packaging and quality<sup>12</sup> and has been a major force in the regulation, testing, and marketing of pharmaceuticals in the United States since that time, albeit undergoing subsequent amendments. It was no accident that the HPUS was included as an additional legally recognized official drug standard, although how it actually happened remains unclear. Copeland’s position as an advocate of homeopathy was well known and it is believed that he slipped the HPUS provision into the bill at an early stage of its revision. The Congressional record contains no information about Copeland’s motive or intent,<sup>9</sup> although he did indicate his wish that the bill would not interfere with the practice of alternative medicine. Homeopathic leaders earlier had proposed including a section—Section 4(e)—declaring that government officials could not determine “therapeutic values” contrary to those pronounced by the United States Pharmacopeia, the National Formulary, or “any medical text-

book approved for study in the curriculum of any recognized medical school or college in the United States,”<sup>9</sup> which would have covered homeopathy. Copeland saw difficulties in adopting the “textbook” provision, and favored instead the recognition of substances in the HPUS as drugs in Section 4 of the bill. By enacting into law the HPUS as an official standard, Copeland fulfilled a lifelong quest, and arguably preserved homeopathy as a legitimate medical practice in the United States. The act certainly assured homeopathic doctors the legal right to prescribe homeopathic medicines that conformed to the HPUS and, perhaps looking far into the future, made possible the modest renaissance homeopathy has enjoyed in recent years.

Copeland’s legacy may be considered from different perspectives. First and foremost, as a physician-legislator, his exemplary contributions are largely unrivaled. Physicians have made up only 1.1 percent of all members of Congress in the past several decades,<sup>13</sup> and of this number Copeland is a fine example of a physician who answered the call to lend his expertise to, as Senator Frist puts it, “dramatically alter and improve the course of the world’s medical care.”<sup>1p116</sup>

Among the small community of homeopaths influencing American medicine, Copeland is a giant. His impact as senator-legislator and general public servant exceeds that of any other homeopath, including Senator Jacob Gallinger who, while achieving great stature, was unable to pass into legislation any of the health causes he supported. Of the homeopaths who have left an enduring clinical legacy to American medicine, perhaps Copeland falls short of Constantin Hering, who introduced nitroglycerine use,<sup>14</sup> Henry Randall Griffith, who popularized curare anesthesia,<sup>15</sup> and Charles Geckeler, who laid the foundation for what eventually grew into the world-renowned Hahnemann Cardiovascular Institute.<sup>16</sup>

## Despite Copeland’s efforts, homeopathy dwindled and became marginalized



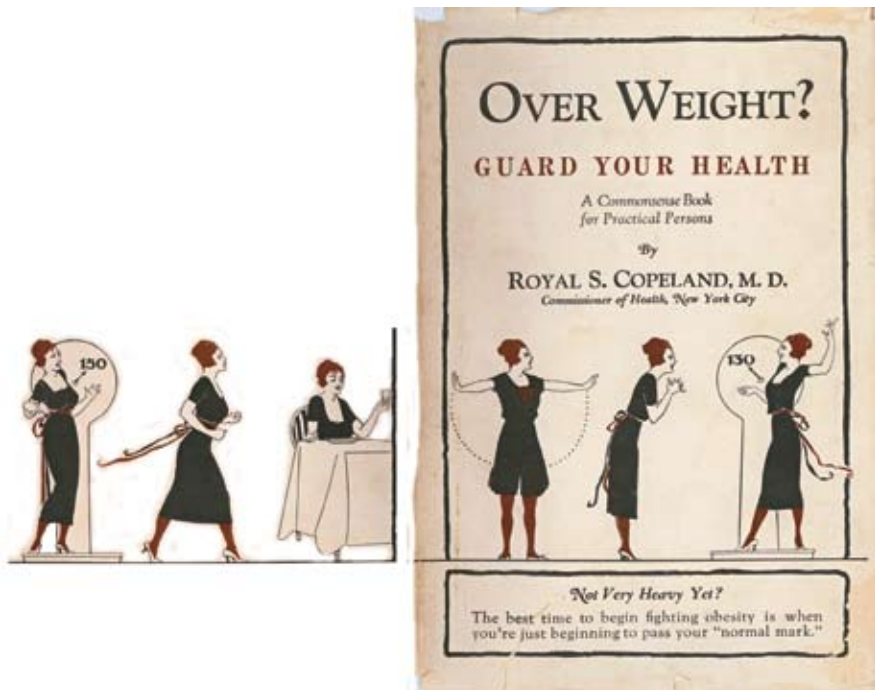
Copeland had few peers in the homeopathic profession as a tireless champion of the cause. While providing inspired leadership as a clinician, educator, and administrator, he was at the same time building bridges between homeopathy and allopathy at the highest levels. Although one man alone could not save American homeopathy from passing into oblivion, the profession might have survived as a stronger presence had there been others like Copeland. There are reasons to believe that, with more assertive effort and greater unity by

homeopathic educators in the mid-1920s, the specialty could have continued to exist in allopathic medical schools.<sup>5p162</sup>

Were Copeland alive today, he would doubtless be aggrieved that the teaching of homeopathy has entirely disappeared from U.S. medical schools, with the profession more marginalized than it ever was in his day. Nevertheless, if not for the passage of the 1938 Act, homeopathy would likely be in worse straits; one wonders if homeopathic medicines could have been legally prescribed at all.

Copeland was among the first physicians to use the media to communicate with the general public about health matters. Many of the causes Copeland adopted had been introduced to him by homeopathy, even though in his role as public health official and media figure, he said very little about it. By realizing and widely promoting the importance of self-care and a healthy lifestyle, including the need to address obesity as a public health problem, he was ahead of his time. His book, *Over Weight? Guard Your Health: A Commonsense Book for Practical Persons*,<sup>17</sup> reads well even by current standards; most of what he wrote in 1922 is still found in today's popular books about how to lose weight, where surprisingly little is new!

Always concerned for the health and welfare of his colleagues, Copeland remarked that "good government consists in the last analysis in the maintenance of good health on the part of the body politic."<sup>5p219</sup> He had enjoined his senatorial colleagues to "avoid excitement and shorten [the] working day."<sup>5p218</sup> Unfortunately, he did not find it so easy to follow his own advice. The man who never seemed to need much sleep died four days after passage of his bill, "a victim of the overwork and congressional strain against which he had cautioned his colleagues."<sup>5p218</sup>



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