

1 INTERVIEW OF DR. JAMES TURNER, 1994

2 BLAKE HAILEY: Today's date is April
3 the 6th, 1994. I'm Blake Hailey, and we have
4 with us Dr. James Turner, professor and chair of
5 Cell Biology and Anatomy in Cell Biology. We're
6 making this tape at the University of North Texas
7 Health Science Center at Fort Worth in the Bio
8 Med Communications Department of the Gibson D.
9 Lewis Health Science Library.

10 Dr. Turner, after saying all of that
11 I'd like to turn over to you now, if we could,
12 and talk about your extensive background before
13 you came to the Health Science Center.

14 DR. JAMES TURNER: Sure. I'll be
15 glad to. I am a basic scientist by training.
16 Received my undergraduate training from the
17 Virginia Military Institute in the Department of
18 Biology. And then from there proceeded onto
19 graduate training at the University of Richmond
20 in Virginia and masters degree in the area of
21 Biology and then Ph.D. doctoral studies at the
22 University of Tennessee in the Department of
23 Zoology.

24 After receiving my Ph.D. degree from
25 the University of Tennessee, proceeded onto Post

1 Doctorial Training at the Case Western Reserve
2 School of Medicine in the Department of Anatomy.
3 Actually, they are transitioning from basically
4 zoological training to a anatomical discipline
5 that I became interested in this particular area
6 and department that I am now associated with. My
7 post doctoral training afforded me the
8 opportunity to extend my research interest, but
9 also become more familiar with the anatomical
10 disciplines.

11 And so from that point on I
12 proceeded to my first tenured position as a faculty at
13 the Bowman Gray School of Medicine of Wake Forest
14 University.

15 BLAKE HAILEY: This is about in the
16 what, the late 70s or late 80s?

17 DR. JAMES TURNER: Right. In the
18 70s. Spent 18 years there proceeding through the
19 ranks and rose to the rank a full professor, in
20 that department. Also the director of their
21 Basic Science Division of the Eye Institute at
22 the Bowman Gray School of Medicine before
23 proceeding here in 1992 in August to become chair
24 of this department.

25 BLAKE HAILEY: What lead you consider

1 TCOM at that time before spending such a
2 prestigious time at the other university?

3 DR. JAMES TURNER: Well, of course,
4 at that -- at that time I became very much
5 interested in increased leadership. In my
6 discipline, and as one proceeds through the
7 ranks, one would logically consider to increase
8 their responsibilities, and one of those areas
9 would be a department chair. In that way, you
10 can afford leadership to an institution, but also
11 to discipline.

12 BLAKE HAILEY: Uh-huh.

13 DR. JAMES TURNER: And so that was a
14 consideration I had been keeping in mind for
15 several years. Towards the end of my tenure there at
16 Lake Forest and began to look at various
17 positions throughout the country over about a
18 two-year time period, and then decided on this
19 institution.

20 BLAKE HAILEY: What were some of the
21 things that attracted you to TCOM?

22 DR. JAMES TURNER: Well, obviously
23 the -- the idea that this would be a very
24 growth-oriented institution because of the -- at
25 that time, the pending new designation as a

1 health science center would indicate fantastic
2 opportunities for further growth and development.
3 Also, there was an opportunity to develop my
4 interest more in visual sciences, to recruit
5 outstanding leaders in various fields of research
6 that relates to eye disease concerns. Also, in
7 this community the location of Alcon Research
8 Laboratories was an interesting draw as well.

9 The -- the dean then, the new dean,
10 Ben Cohen, was very supportive in the efforts to
11 build an eye institute and to further develop the
12 department. So those were real growth-oriented
13 opportunities that I saw that I could have
14 significant input. And also knowing the -- the
15 future or the projected future of the health
16 science center, I felt I could play a prominent
17 role, and I'm an individual who likes to be in a
18 growth-oriented environment.

19 BLAKE HAILEY: Well, obviously your
20 research as well has grown in the past few years.
21 Could you tell us a little about the research? I
22 know you started out very small and now you have,
23 I think, nine people that you work with?

24 DR. JAMES TURNER: That's correct.
25 As one begins their research career you begin

1 with a single investigator in your -- in your
2 laboratory and if you're fortunate for your
3 program to grow and develop, that means that
4 there are more individuals that help support the
5 effort. We have been involved in eye disease
6 research for many years and we have, of late last
7 five or six years, I've been pioneers in the new
8 field of retina transplantation studies.

9 BLAKE HAILEY: Could you go into a
10 little bit of that?

11 DR. JAMES TURNER: And we were able
12 to, for the first time, to cure an eye disease in
13 animal model of inherited dystrophy, very similar to some
14 human diseases, by transplanting healthy cells
15 into the diseased eye and preventing further,
16 degeneration.

17 That captured quite a bit of
18 imagination and enthusiasm from various funding
19 agencies like the National Institute of Health,
20 The National Eye Institute. And -- and we are
21 working in that program at the present time and
22 expanding our interest along those lines.

23 BLAKE HAILEY: What other research do
24 you plan to look into as -- in the next few
25 years? Do you have any other thoughts in mind?

1 DR. JAMES TURNER: Well, yes. We are
2 interested in -- not only the inherited diseases
3 of the eye -- but in the aging process as well.
4 The two prominent diseases, diabetic retinopathy
5 and senile macular degeneration effect two
6 distinct classes of individuals. The diabetic
7 retinopathy effects primarily the working class
8 individual. That is, then, the leading cause of
9 blindness in that age group, age related macular
10 degeneration is the leading cause of blindness in
11 more elderly and retired population, so we are
12 working in those areas and are looking for ways
13 to either cure the disease or slow the process of
14 degeneration.

15 BLAKE HAILEY: And you have -- and
16 you will be working with us in the next five or
17 so years, it sounds like?

18 DR. JAMES TURNER: Absolutely.

19 BLAKE HAILEY: Excellent.

20 DR. JAMES TURNER: We are looking for
21 various opportunities to extend those programs,
22 yes.

23 BLAKE HAILEY: We've been focusing a
24 lot on our interviews about the Health Science
25 Center and all and the changes and you came while

1 we were still TCOM. Why do you feel it's
2 necessary for the growth and success of that
3 institution to become the UNT Health Science
4 Center?

5 DR. JAMES TURNER: Well --

6 BLAKE HAILEY: Your thoughts on that?

7 DR. JAMES TURNER: Yes. This
8 institution is a growing institution and it's
9 probably, as I would classify it, in it's
10 adolescence at the present time. From it's
11 infancy to early adolescence, if we could
12 consider that on a timeline, this institution
13 consisted essentially of a medical school. But
14 knowing full well what capacity for further
15 service in the health related professions are, I
16 think the initiative to become a health science
17 center was a very wise one because we feel that
18 there is a great need in the area of North Texas
19 for other initiatives in addition to training
20 medical professionals to train paramedical
21 professionals, so to speak, in other
22 health-related areas, and to also offer a very
23 strong graduate program to train people how to do
24 research in health-related issues are charges
25 that the administration has taken on in this new

1 designation and that's very important.

2 BLAKE HAILEY: Are there some other
3 things you'd like to see added to the Health
4 Science Center that you're particularly
5 interested in seeing come on board? I know the
6 allied health has been mentioned.

7 DR. JAMES TURNER: Well, to begin
8 with, the institution has recently embraced the
9 concept of centers of excellence.

10 BLAKE HAILEY: Uh-huh.

11 DR. JAMES TURNER: These are
12 interdisciplinary centers that may bridge several
13 departments, both basic science and clinical. We
14 have, at the moment, targeted perhaps four to six
15 areas where we feel we have real research
16 strengths.

17 BLAKE HAILEY: Uh-huh.

18 DR. JAMES TURNER: Several of those
19 centers are now fully organized and are in the
20 process of maturing. One of those, fortunately,
21 I had the privilege to organize, is the new North
22 Texas Eye Research Institute. And there are
23 others. There's the Drug Abuse Institute, Aging
24 Institute and perhaps a Cardiovascular Institute
25 that we'll be developing soon. That is the first

1 phase of exciting further growth and development
2 through the Health Science Center concept,
3 centers of excellence.

4 Then would follow additional
5 schools. Public health is an issue that's before
6 us now and very immediate. Allied Health
7 Sciences, I would like to see developed and
8 perhaps even a graduate school of pharmacy. So
9 within the next five to ten years I think we see
10 those prospects maturing because there is a need
11 within the community and an expressed desire by
12 the community to support these issues.

13 BLAKE HAILEY: Well how do you see
14 this Health Science Center -- what do you think
15 it has to offer that some of the others in Texas
16 do not have to offer?

17 DR. JAMES TURNER: In a very unique
18 way, we have been since inception as a medical school interested
19 and have become noted for our expertise in
20 primary health care.

21 BLAKE HAILEY: Uh-huh.

22 DR. JAMES TURNER: We are in a
23 position to move forward in a very strong and
24 direct way with those issues in mind as we
25 develop further the expertise in the medical

1 school and our new schools that will come on
2 board with the designation as a health science
3 center.

4 This -- this means that we are in a
5 position to be leaders in that field. And it's
6 my hope that we will be recognized and we'll be
7 in a position to do so. Other medical centers
8 within the state at the moment are having some
9 difficult times in deciding how they will be
10 proactive with regards to primary health care.
11 That has been our initiative and goal. We're
12 geared to that, and we do that very well. So we
13 can be a leader or the leader within the state
14 with regards to those initiatives and show our
15 other health science centers how to focus and
16 concentrate on those important and timely issues
17 for this next decade.

18 BLAKE HAILEY: What challenges lie
19 ahead for you and the health science center in
20 the next decade, then?

21 DR. JAMES TURNER: Well, I think
22 personally, myself in transitioning over this
23 last year and a half, from a scientist and now a
24 administrator scientist has been most gratifying
25 and enlightening. I think the challenges that

1 lie ahead for myself are to further develop those
2 areas of which I have distinct responsibility to
3 further develop excellence and expertise in
4 teaching research and service within the
5 Department of Anatomy and Cell Biology to foster further
6 growth and development of the North Texas Eye
7 Research Institute to where we're fully
8 constituted and have a clinical base as well as a
9 basic science base center interface and offer
10 these services to the persons of Texas and the
11 areas in the North Texas region.

12 I think also to go beyond that, to
13 be involved in various areas of strategic
14 planning with regards to the further development
15 of this institution is an area that I wish to be
16 involved with in the future and that offers a
17 real challenge.

18 BLAKE HAILEY: Now you're the
19 director of the North Texas Eye?

20 DR. JAMES TURNER: Yes, I am.

21 BLAKE HAILEY: And you plan to
22 continue that as well, then?

23 DR. JAMES TURNER: I do. But it will
24 evolve eventually to where there will be a
25 clinical component. At the moment there is a

1 very strong basic science component. Today we
2 have over 20 faculty who are basic scientist
3 involved in vision research and approximately a
4 total of about 50 persons are involved, staff and
5 students.

6 We are in the process of responding
7 to a consultants report on how to develop a
8 clinical component to this institute. Once that
9 is in place, then an executive director will be
10 appointed over the entire institute of
11 operations.

12 BLAKE HAILEY: Oh. You plan to help
13 select a person at that point?

14 DR. JAMES TURNER: Yes, that's
15 correct. We're in the process of employing a
16 steering committee next month, and part of that
17 responsibility will be to develop a strategic
18 master plan and also to serve as a selection
19 committee for these new clinical individuals that
20 we wish to have join us.

21 BLAKE HAILEY: In your role as a
22 chairman, do you see that changing much in the
23 near future?

24 DR. JAMES TURNER: I see the role of
25 a chairman changing just like the roll of a CEO

1 is changing in business today. To be more of an
2 individual who is a coach, a cheerleader, a
3 facilitator than one who dictates events and
4 happenings within a department and a institution.
5 To work collegially with one's faculty and to
6 empower the faculty to help make decisions and
7 move us forward is an exciting element and one
8 that I look forward to as far as new strategies
9 for an administering departments and institutes.

10 BLAKE HAILEY: Dr. Turner, we've
11 covered a lot of ground here in a short amount of
12 time. Are there some areas that you'd like to go
13 into that we haven't mentioned? Maybe in the
14 research or any other thoughts you might have on
15 anything?

16 DR. JAMES TURNER: Well, another
17 initiative that we're very excited about at this
18 institution will be one of molecular biology and
19 molecular genetics.

20 BLAKE HAILEY: Oh.

21 DR. JAMES TURNER: The wave of the
22 future with regards to understanding basic
23 mechanisms and disease processes. We have been
24 fortunate in our department to recruit several
25 people in that area, and we look forward to that

1 serving as a nucleus to an overall institutional
2 initiative in the near future. So that's another
3 area of excitement that we're looking to -- for
4 further growth and development at the University
5 of North Texas Health Science Center.

6 BLAKE HAILEY: So you plan -- plans
7 to expand the next couple years and more?

8 DR. JAMES TURNER: Absolutely.

9 BLAKE HAILEY: Okay.

10 DR. JAMES TURNER: And that will
11 ducktail with a new DNA laboratory and it will be
12 an initiative hopefully through several of the
13 clinical and basic science departments.

14 BLAKE HAILEY: Is there a chance for
15 a lot of linkage between here and the campus in
16 Denton that could help you out in some way?

17 DR. JAMES TURNER: Well, on the
18 broader context, although in our department a
19 major emphasis is in visual science, we are in
20 the large part neuroscientists and so our hope is
21 that we can develop linkages with the Denton
22 campus and develop neuroscience initiatives and
23 perhaps even a neuroscience institute.

24 BLAKE HAILEY: But that might be down
25 the road, another five or ten years?

1 DR. JAMES TURNER: Certainly. I

2 would think so, yes.

3 BLAKE HAILEY: Are there some other

4 discussions you would like to bring up that we

5 haven't?

6 DR. JAMES TURNER: At the present

7 time I think you've done an excellent job in the

8 interview process, and I think we've discussed

9 quite a few important issues.

10 BLAKE HAILEY: I do appreciate you

11 taking the time out of your busy schedule.

12 Wonder if you had time to fit us in with

13 everything else that you're involved in. I know

14 that the Health Science Center owes you a lot for

15 coming here and doing the great work that you've

16 done and will continue to do and we thank you for

17 all the work you've done.

18 DR. JAMES TURNER: Certainly been a

19 pleasure, and I'm looking forward with great

20 anticipation to our future.

21 BLAKE HAILEY: Definitely. Sounds

22 like you are looking towards the future.

23 Definitely the kind of people that we seem to

24 enjoy having here, and I've enjoyed interviewing.

25 Thank you again for taking the time out,

1 Dr. Turner, and have a nice afternoon.

2 DR. JAMES TURNER: Well thank you,

3 sir.

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