History of Osteoporosis

Osteoporosis has haunted women since the dawn of history. Egyptian mummies from 4,000 years ago have been found with the telltale dowager’s hump.

An early medical pioneer, the eighteenth century English surgeon, John Hunter discovered that as new bone is laid down in the body, old bone is destroyed, or resorbed. This process is now known as remodeling and was later shown to play a critical role in osteoporosis, though it was not even a recognized disease for more than 100 years after his death.

In the 1830’s the French pathologist Jean Georges Chretien Frederic Martin Lobstein noticed that some patients bones were riddled with larger than normal holes, and he coined the term osteoporosis (porous bone) to describe such deteriorated human bone. In the 1930’s Fuller Albright of Massachusetts General Hospital couldn’t help but ponder what it was about being postmenopausal that made women particularly susceptible to having frail bones.

Somewhere around 1940 he defines postmenopausal osteoporosis and begins treating women with the condition with estrogen. But estrogen therapy can only prevent damage to the skeleton by stemming bone loss. In the 1940’s it was virtually impossible to detect the minimal bone loss seen in the early stages of the disease.

Fortunately, starting in the 1960s, researchers developed more sensitive devices for detecting bone loss, including densitometers, which can determine bone density by measuring changes in the absorption of energy passing through bones in the hand, spine, hip or other body part. This technique enables physicians to detect osteoporosis in its early stages, well before fractures occur. In 1984, the National Institute of Health publicized this disease, citing it as a significant threat to health and emphasizing that bone loss could be reduced by estrogen therapy, calcium, good nutrition and exercise. In the 80’s and 90’s