

The ape-to-human progression: the most common evolution icon is a fraud

Jerry Bergman

A review of the most published modern pictorial icon of evolution shows that it is fraudulent and based on known inaccuracies and false information. This icon also has racist roots and is an extension of the once common, often distorted comparisons found in both scientific publications and popular literature, of ape, African and Caucasian heads.

Darwin suggested an unbroken evolutionary chain of life from simple molecules, such as ammonia, water, and phosphoric salts, to humans.¹ The chain analogy gave birth to the idea of missing links in the chain, an analogy still used today to describe the fact that, instead of a chain, what the fossil record shows is many groups of life-forms with large gaps in the supposed chain between them.² Nonetheless, the so-called “great chain of being” is still presented as fact and, given enough time, more fossil discoveries are all that is needed to locate the many missing links evolutionists believe exist. They are there, or were there; we just need to find evidence of them. Every now and then, a “missing link” discovery claim is made, reinforcing this belief.²

The progression chain

By far the most famous icon of evolution—seen everywhere from book covers to magazine articles to cartoons—is a drawing depicting part of this chain, namely human evolution from a primitive, stooping ape-like creature progressing to a modern human. The progression is usually pictured in four to six steps, but as many as 30 are sometimes shown. One of the earliest examples of the chain was completed by Brooklyn College paleontologist Eric Schlaikjer. His rendition shows 30 links from fish to amphibians, reptiles, mammals, primates, and, at the top of the evolutionary progression, modern humans (figure 1).³

The scenario pictured is very different from that proposed today, but does include some animals still touted as evolutionary links, such as *Seymouria*. Of note is the fact that, according to this chart, the primate common ancestor of humans is a modern ape, and the first human looks very much like a modern man, except that he is pictured with an Einstein-like hairstyle and slight Neandertal facial traits. A clear gap is shown to exist between apes and humans. Also, one could line up living animals and produce a progression very close to the one pictured by Schlaikjer.

The modern-ape-to-human progression

The progression called the “ascent of man” was, in its most recent reincarnation, first illustrated in a best-selling book titled *Early Man*, written by University of California, Berkeley Professor F. Clark Howell.⁴ The progression was printed in a 91-cm foldout on pages 41 to 45 in the 1965 edition and reprinted in both the 1968 and 1973 editions.

The original chart included 15 pictures that traced human evolution from *Pliopithecus* to *Ramapithecus* to *Homo erectus*, all the way to Cro-Magnon and ending with *Homo sapiens* (figure 2).

The ascent-of-man series resembles a baby first learning to walk, from crawling to fully upright walking. The “branching bush” tree diagram of evolution, which pictures evolution as a tree with putative humans branching off of the trunk, has today succeeded the straight-line “marching parade” concept in human evolution. This fact is a tacit admission that anthropologists have known for many years that the parade was wrong.

Lubenow concludes that the human evolution progression

“... has been one of the most successful tools ever used to promote human evolution. It constituted powerful visual ‘proof’ for human evolution that even a small child could grasp. It was a masterpiece of Madison Avenue promotion.”⁵

The parade has been prominently displayed in social science classes, biology classrooms, and on school bulletin boards for decades. Because of its graphic power, the progression has been “indelibly etched into the minds of billions of people worldwide.”⁵

Ironically, the progression was known to be fake when it was first published. The book that included it, after noting only that fragmentary fossil evidence exists for human evolution, openly admitted that the progression was drawn from largely manufactured or distorted evidence. In the author’s words, “Many of the figures shown here have been built up” from a few fragments, “a jaw, some teeth perhaps ... and thus are products of educated guessing.”⁶ The author added that “even if later finds should dictate changes”, i.e. even if the drawings are wrong, “these reconstructions serve a purpose in showing how these creatures might have looked” (the term *might* is in the original). The progression pictures are also very misleading, even according to orthodox Darwinism, because they imply a single evolutionary line to humans—in contrast to the dominant view today, which is that human evolution is actually a branching bush.

Below each of the 15 illustrations was a discussion of each picture—something that is rarely ever included today when the progression is shown. Usually the progression starts with a picture that looks like *Dryopithecus*, adding *A. robustus*, *Homo erectus*, Neandertal man, Cro-Magnon

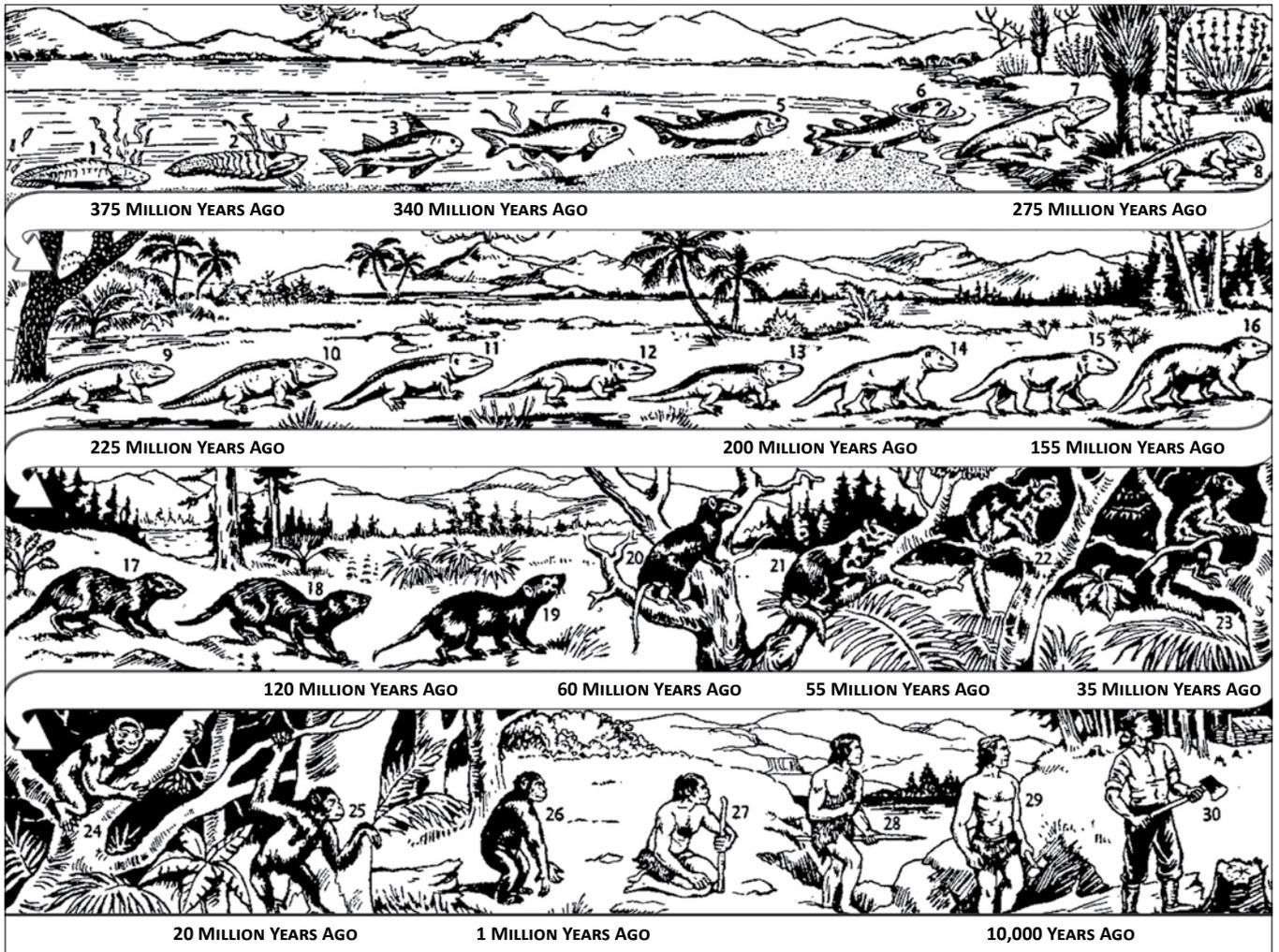


Figure 1. An early example of the evolutionary progression by Brooklyn College paleontologist Eric Schlaikjer (from Schlaikjer³; an identical, but much larger and full color figure was printed on page 1). Note that the progression starts with a vertebrate, a finless fish. Also note that the fish in image 3 has a dorsal fin that disappears in image 4. The evolution of humans shows a monkey in image 26, a stereotypical caveman in image 27 and a modern man in image 28. In image 20 life climbs into trees and becomes arboreal then, in image 25, primates leave the arboreal life and become terrestrial. Unless examined carefully, such illustrations appear to show clear proof of molecules-to-man or at least fish-to-man evolution. These progression illustrations are very convincing to much of the uninformed public.

man, and modern man, *Homo sapiens*. Neandertals, even in 1970, were no longer considered part of our evolutionary lineage, but another branch of the human family tree. Both modern humans and Neandertals are today assumed to have evolved from *Homo erectus*.⁷

Lubenow stresses that it is “not that more recent fossil discoveries have revealed that the progression was inaccurate. No, the truth is far worse.”⁵ A few of the “far worse” examples include the fact that the proto-apes pictured were not bipedal, yet are shown in the illustrations as being expertly bipedal. The bipedal apes shown in the evolutionary progression are thought to have lived long before evolutionists believe bipedalism had evolved. The Howell text openly acknowledges this, admitting “although proto-apes and apes were quadrupedal, all are shown here *standing* for purposes of comparison [emphasis added].”²⁴

This admission is actually only partly accurate. Some of the creatures shown in the parade were *physically unable*

to stand erect. Furthermore, although the text describes them as “standing”, they are in fact drawn *walking*. Some of them have one foot in the air, balancing on the other foot as they strode across the page. This gives them a far more human-like appearance than if they were just standing. Accurate comparisons require showing their actual normal quadrupedal, “knuckle-walking” gait.

Another problem is that the size of the illustrations was greatly distorted, showing the *first* link in the progression as a very small animal. With only two exceptions, *Dryopithecus* and Solo man, each progressive link is drawn larger and taller and progressively standing up straighter. The figures shown also become taller as we move toward modern man, not because of fossil or other empirical data demand it, but rather as a result of artistic license that allows the artist to distort the picture to conform to evolutionary theory. They also become progressively *less hairy*, which is also clearly a result of artistic license and not fact. No method

exists allowing anthropologists to determine the amount of body hair for most, if not all, of the fossils—except modern humans. They were clothed with both flesh and hair by the artist.

Furthermore, Howell openly admitted that the first link, *Pliopithecus*, was not even considered to be an evolutionary link to humans in 1965 when the book was first published, but rather “is now classed as an ancestor of the Gibbon line”.⁶ For the second step, *Proconsul*, even though it is drawn to look more like a modern human, the picture caption admits that “proconsul is considered to be a very early ape, the ancestor of the chimpanzee and perhaps of the gorilla.”⁶ For *Dryopithecus*, the text acknowledges that

the entire animal, although also appearing very human-like but stooped, is known only from “a few jaws and teeth”. About the fourth step, *Oreopithecus*, the text states it is a “likely *side branch* on man’s family tree” and not a human evolutionary ancestor.

The text also notes that the next picture, *Ramapithecus*, is “now thought by some experts to be the oldest of man’s ancestors in a direct line.” Consequently, to conform to the then orthodox view of evolution, the progression should have begun with *Ramapithecus*. Very soon after the Time-Life book was published in 1965, Elwyn Simons of Yale found a more complete skull of *Ramapithecus* that convinced evolutionists that *Ramapithecus* had no part in human evolution. Yet page 37 of the 1970 edition of the Time-Life book *Early Man* shows a broken palate that included *Ramapithecus* in both the first step in the human “jaw evolution” parade and in the human evolution parade. These pictures should have been revised in the new edition to reflect Simon’s findings, but were not.

Two more examples are Solo man, known only by “two shin bones and some fragments of skull”,⁸ and *A. robustus*, both which are now interpreted as “an evolutionary dead end in man’s ancestry.”⁹ Also of note is the fact that from *A. africanus* to modern man, the bodies look remarkably similar. Only the heads, most of which seem out of place on the bodies, are very different—more ape-like as we move backward in time away from modern humans.

Although the text does openly point out many of the inaccuracies in the drawings, Lubenow comments that perhaps less than five percent of those who owned the book actually read it in its entirety. Conversely, many casual readers have seen the progression, even if they just glanced at the pictures in the book. Thus, the visual image has effectively “sold the concept of human evolution even though the book revealed that the parade was fictitious.”¹⁰

The National Geographic progression

The parade achieved even more widespread publicity in a *National Geographic* magazine special dated November 1985.¹¹ Pages 574 to 577 show the now-familiar progression in a realistic set of well-done drawings (figure 3). In some ways, though, this illustration is even less accurate. Beginning with *A. afarensis*, the figures are not walking as

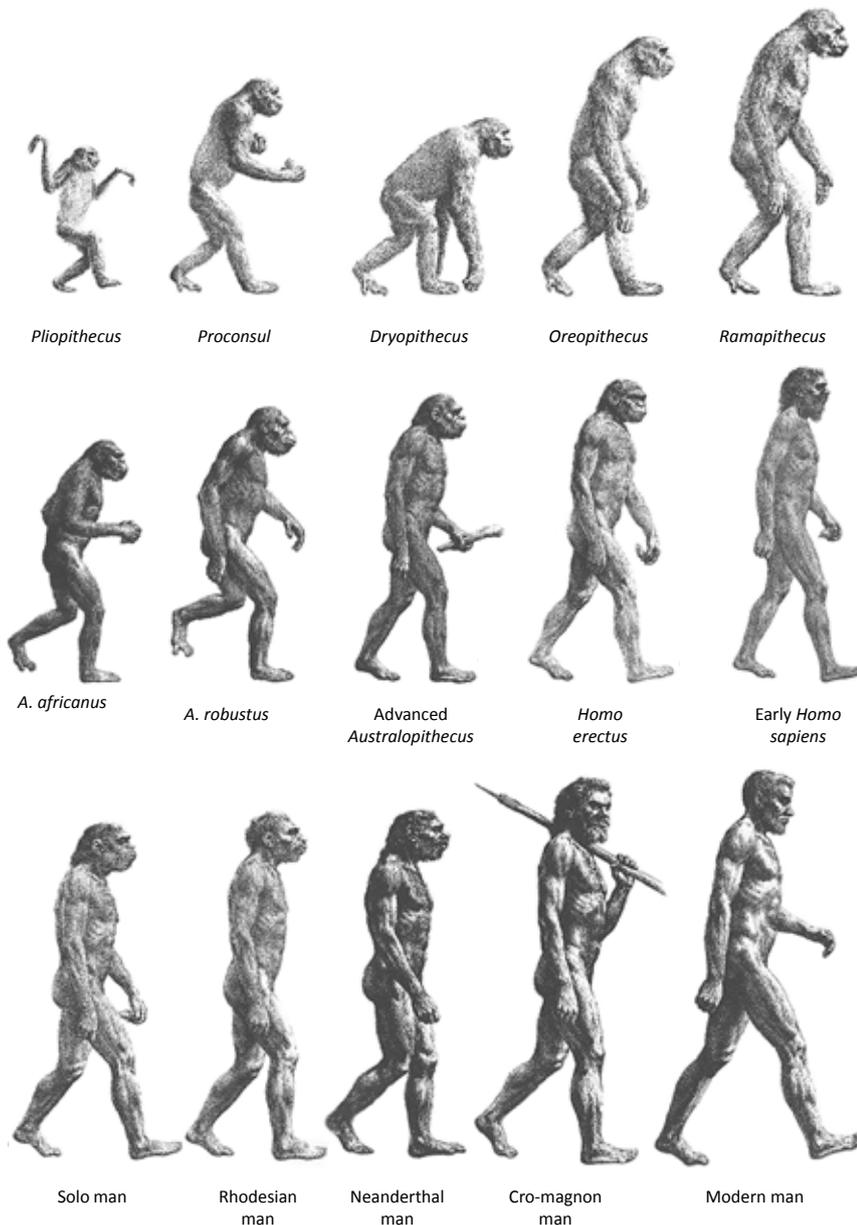


Figure 2. Illustrations from a Time-Life book.⁴ See the text for a detailed discussion. Note that from *A. africanus* the main change, aside from the poor posture, is the head.

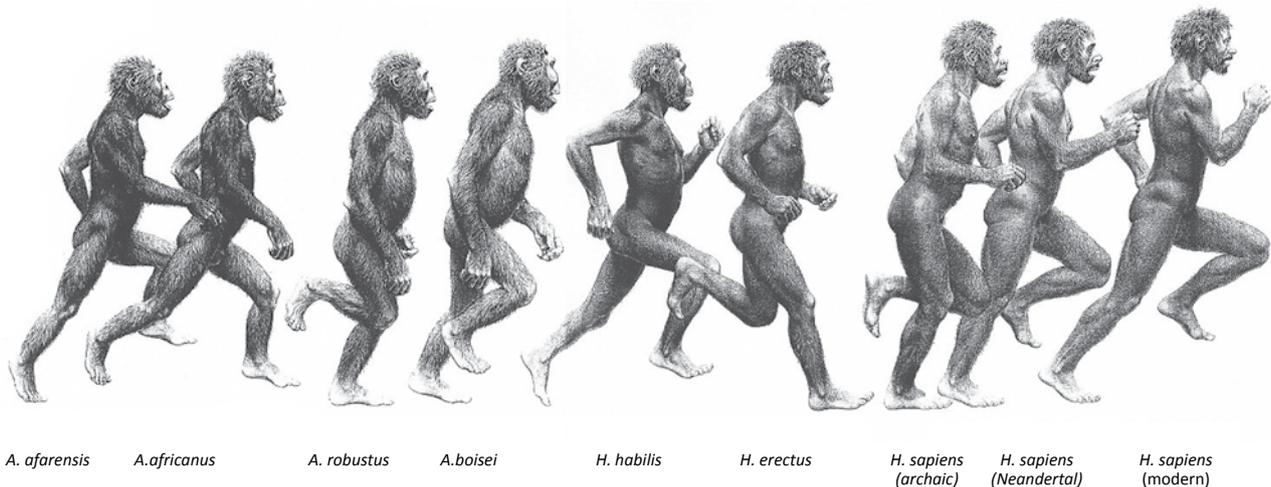


Figure 3. Illustrations from the *National Geographic* magazine.¹¹ Note that from *A. afarensis* to modern man, the bodies are almost identical except modern man is slightly less hairy. The heads, though, have changed greatly.

they were in the Time-Life book, but are shown as expert runners, progressively running faster and with more grace, arms swinging as the parade progresses toward modern humans. The first heads in the progression are very apelike; the later heads look very Negroid; and the last head and body is that of a very handsome, tanned Caucasian.

The major body differences are that the arms are comparatively shorter and the body is progressively less hairy as the progression to modern humans moves forward. The descriptions give no hint of the controversy about the fossils that the illustrations are designed to depict. The text does admit that the artist “speculated on skin tone and the amount of body hair and its texture” and that the relationships between the fossils pictured are “still not fully understood”.¹²

False implications of the drawings

The parade implies that evolution from our putative ape-like ancestor called *Pliopithecus* (that looks much like a chimp) to modern humans was very straightforward, showing hereditary changes progressively moving forward along a single line from our ape-like ancestor to modern humans. As shown graphically by Burenhult, even if ape-to-human evolution is true, and a progression of some type actually occurred, so much controversy exists about it that a single diagram is greatly misleading.¹³ Burenhult shows four different human evolution trees, including those developed by several of the most prominent modern paleontologists including Donald Johanson, Tim White, Richard Leakey, Collin Groves and Bernard Wood. Each of these four family trees is drastically different and, in contrast to the visual parade illustration, shows several offshoots or side branches.

An important fact is that there is no evidence that *any* creature walked bent over, as the progression invariably shows and as many other pictures of our putative ancestors show.⁷ When apes walk on all fours, they “knuckle walk” and only appear to be bent over, and for this reason it was assumed

that, as our common ancestor with apes evolved into humans, the stoop became less pronounced. However, no evidence exists of a creature “hovering between a two-legged and a four-legged stance” as the progression shows.⁷

The more complete progression

A common version of the evolutionary progression shows the first step involving a fish in water, then a fish crawling out with small legs evolving into a four-legged animal, and, last, a set of primates similar to the old parade leading to humans. In recent years the parade itself has evolved due to recent fossil finds, more detailed study of the fossil record, and DNA analysis. Fortunately, the “new view” refuting the parade is now being presented in some mass media publications. A *Newsweek* article pictured the parade as the “old view” and, next to it, showed the new view, a complex bush that is very different than the now-famous progression.¹⁴

Others are more blunt, concluding that “The gradual progression from crouching to standing as shown in the series ... is almost certainly wrong”, even from an evolutionary standpoint.⁷ One reason Hitchcock gives for this assessment is that it is now believed that early humans “were able to walk upright a lot earlier than was thought when the first ‘ascent of man’ illustrations were published. In fact, like chimpanzees today, our ape ancestors could probably walk upright on two legs whenever it suited them.”⁷ For this reason Hitchcock recommends that “it would be best to scrap the [progression] illustration altogether”.¹⁵

Racist history

The progression has been a common theme in evolutionary literature since about 1870, usually with obvious racist implications. Often such progressions would show an ape, an African, then a Caucasian—or an ape, a Neandertal and modern man. For example, Chapin¹⁶ illustrates a gorilla, a Neandertal and modern

man, all grossly distorted except the modern man. He pictures Neandertal as very apelike, a picture that is today recognized as very inaccurate.¹⁷ Also, the pictures are often grossly distorted. For example, University of Michigan Winchell pictured the heads of a female gorilla and a female Hottentot (an African tribal ethnic group) as remarkably similar (figure 4).¹⁸

The earliest evolutionary progression drawings show evolution from the most primitive to the most advanced animals starting with a fish, then to a bird, then a dog, a monkey, an African or some other “primitive human”, and in the last picture is a Caucasian. One common example of the evolutionary progression shows only the head profiles.¹⁹

Another common illustration was an evolutionary progression from what purports to be the most primitive human (typically an aborigine or an African) to the most advanced human (a Caucasian, often appearing Nordic or Scandinavian). For an example, in profiles that stress the change in the facial angle from horizontal to vertical, the African is shown as being the most primitive and the Nordic looking man is shown as being the most advanced.²⁰ Even the modern illustrations show evidence of this racist past. For example, many show the figures less hairy and the skin color getting lighter as evolution progresses.

The progression is widely recognized as a gross distortion by academics but is, nonetheless, not only a cultural icon but a cross-cultural icon. Stephen Jay Gould wrote in reference to the progression, what he calls the *march of progress*, that “My books are dedicated to debunking this picture of evolution”, adding that it is even used as jacket illustrations in four translations of his books, something he adds he has no control over.²¹ The reason it is so universal, Gould notes, is because “The march of progress is the canonical representation of evolution—the one picture immediately grasped and viscerally understood by all.”²²

Conclusion

As Lubenow summarizes, the parade “is raw propaganda—brilliant propaganda, but raw nonetheless” and few evolutionists have “protested this gross lack of scientific objectivity” shown in the Time-Life and other books.¹⁰ Yet this outrageous and raw propaganda has no doubt influenced millions of persons to accept the Darwinian worldview of human evolution and is, by far, the most popular icon of evolution that has been presented everywhere in the media for decades. The fact is, that “The once popular fresco showing a single file of marching hominids becoming ever more vertical, tall, and hairless now appears to be a fiction.”²³

These drawings are not only false; they are also clearly racist, as is obvious when we compare the drawings to photographs of the animal or race they are supposed to represent. Most of the drawings depict African-looking males as primitive humans evolving into modern humans of lighter skin and hair.

The racism discussed above still exists in our society. One study showed that “Americans of various races still unconsciously dehumanize their black fellow citizens by

subtly associating them with apes”, an association no doubt reinforced by the common progression drawings.²⁴

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Jerry Bergman has nine academic degrees including two Ph.Ds. His major areas of study for his graduate work were in biology, chemistry, psychology, and evaluation and research. He graduated from Wayne State University in Detroit, Medical University of Ohio in Toledo, University of Toledo and Bowling Green State University. A prolific writer, Dr Bergman has taught biology, chemistry and biochemistry at Northwest State in Archbold, Ohio for over 24 years. He is now an adjunct associate professor at The University of Toledo Medical College.