Earl McBride was born in 1891, grew up in small towns in Kansas and Oklahoma, and graduated from Epworth University (now Oklahoma City University) in 1910. Influenced by impressive childhood contacts with family doctors, he decided to study medicine. He graduated from Oklahoma University in 1912 with 2 years of credit in medicine and enrolled in Columbia University, New York City, where he received his MD degree 2 years later. He returned home to Oklahoma and served as a small-town general practitioner in Navina and then Ralston. This was during World War I, and for 2 years he worked in the American Women’s Red Cross Hospital in South Devon, England.

Returning to Oklahoma City after his discharge, he unexpectedly had the opportunity to buy the equipment of an orthopedic surgeon who had died suddenly of the influenza epidemic during the war. He recognized that he needed additional training in spite of his army experience with trauma, and therefore spent a year in New York City at the Hospital for the Ruptured and Crippled (now the Hospital for Special Surgery). When McBride returned to Oklahoma City in 1920, virtually no one had ever heard of this special field of medicine called “orthopedic surgery.” In addition, that area of the country was a center for osteopathy, and there was confusion between the two terms. Thus McBride soon replaced the term “orthopedic surgeon” on his shingle with “bone and joint surgery.” Initially his office was in a residential structure that had four rooms upstairs. He kept his patients overnight or longer and a neighbor prepared food for them. He thus renamed the office “The McBride Clinic.” The practice flourished, and in 1939 a new 30-bed facility was established in Oklahoma City. The hospital had been known as the Reconstruction Hospital but this too was a confusing term, so the name was officially changed to the “Bone and Joint Hospital” at that time and has remained the same since. The clinic grew and by 1986 it was internationally known, with 15 doctors and 450 other employees specializing in orthopedics, arthritis, industrial injuries, and sports medicine. McBride remained dedicated to the continuing care of musculoskeletal problems throughout his life.

In 1936 the first edition of the book by McBride, entitled Disability Evaluation, was published by J.B. Lippincott. This volume underwent six editions, the last being in 1963. It presented the first attempt by an orthopedic surgeon systematically to evaluate human functional disability. It grappled with anatomic and physiologic tissue damage, restrictions on working conditions, and psychological issues. It even attempted to assess functional deficiencies involving coordination, strength, endurance, etc. The book proposed a rating system that tried to separate disabling functional deficiencies from disabling physical impairments. The 550 pages of the first edition represented a significant and extensive undertaking in the area of the disabled worker and the workplace.

Unfortunately, this initial effort was so complex that it did not find much acceptance in the medical community. None of the members of the orthopedic group that McBride founded used the system. Personal communication with senior members of the group revealed that McBride himself did not use his own system in his later years. He relied instead on the guides in Evaluation of Permanent Impairment, published by the American Medical Association. He was a member of the orthopedic committee that set up those guidelines. This original text is the starting point of an ongoing effort to blend the science and art of medicine in the assessment of the musculoskeletal system. His poem, The Art of Medicine, is an appropriate epilogue to this effort.