Obituary

Dr. Harold Griffith 1894-1985

Dr. Harold Randall Griffith was one of the great contributors to world medicine. The outstanding achievement of his career was the introduction of muscle relaxants to the practice of anaesthesia on January 23, 1942. On that day he made it possible for anaesthetists to take a giant step forward in reducing anaesthesia morbidity and mortality, which allowed for the rapid development of surgery of all types which we now take for granted. The anaesthesia world has recognized his achievements, for there are few physicians who have made as great a contribution to medicine in the 20th century. The book, Arrows of Mercy by Phillip Smith, published by Doubleday Canada Limited 1969, is an extensive biography and life story of this modest genius who captured the admiration and affection of so many whose lives crossed his path.

Harold Randall Griffith was born July 25, 1894, and died May 7, 1985. The last two years of his life were years of progressive debilitation from Parkinson's disease but were endured with the same great courage that propelled him through his ninety years.

He graduated from the High School of Montreal in 1910, received his BA from McGill University in 1914, and his MD CM in 1922. Hahnemann Medical College in Philadelphia granted him an MD in homeopathic medicine in 1923.

His training in medicine at McGill was interrupted by World War I during which he served in No. 6 Field Ambulance (a McGill unit) as a stretcher bearer. He was awarded the Military Medal for "bravery in the field" at the battle of Vimy Ridge. An opportunity presented itself for transfer out of the trenches and mud of France to the blue skies of the Mediterranean, which he took, and he finished that war as a probationer Surgeon Sub-Lieutenant in the Royal Navy. It is interesting to note that in World War II he was a consultant in anaesthesia to the Royal Canadian Air Force and, thus, had the distinction of serving in all three branches of the armed forces of his country.

He developed his interest in anaesthesia as a medical student during which time he gave many anaesthetics and developed an acute awareness of the subtleties essential for safe anaesthesia practice, with the drugs and techniques available at that time. It is not surprising, therefore, that anaesthesia became his professional career and that he served as Anaesthetist-in-Chief at the Homeopathic Hospital, subsequently called the Queen Elizabeth Hospital, from 1923 to 1959, and remained active as an anaesthetist until 1966.

During World War II there was a dire need for anaesthesia personnel at base hospitals and he helped to organize a teaching programme in anaesthesia for physicians in the armed forces. Some of these early trainees subsequently became highly respected and well-known anaesthetists. More importantly, however, it led him to organize and develop the McGill Diploma Course in Anaesthesia. A feature of the original diploma course was the weekly meetings to which all staff and residents went, including those from the University of Montreal. At these a resident presented a paper and there
was a guest speaker. Basic science lectures were organized with the co-operation of other McGill staff.

In 1946 he was made a Lecturer in the newly formed Department of Anaesthesia under Professor Wesley Bourne. He was promoted to Assistant Professor in 1948 and from 1951 to 1956 served as Professor and Chairman of the Department. He was named Professor Emeritus in 1956. Thus, Dr. Harold, as he was affectionately known, became one of Canada's best known anaesthetists without ever having had any formal training in anaesthesia. He attributed this to the incredible good fortune of having as good friends the three men he believed to be the leading anaesthetists in the world. They were: Dr. Frank McMechan of Cleveland, who founded the International Anesthesia Research Society; Dr. Wesley Bourne of Montreal, and Dr. Ralph Waters of the University of Wisconsin. These three men were fighting the difficult battle of gaining recognition for anaesthesia as a specialty and they soon had Dr. Griffith deeply involved in the fray. He realized that much needed to be done to improve anaesthesia and he developed an intense interest in trying out every new idea. He was practising in the Homeopathic Hospital where his father served for 30 years as the first Medical Director. His brother, Jim, was the Surgeon-in-Chief, and Harold, the Anaesthetist-in-Chief.

Jim was extremely supportive of what Harold was trying to do. It was an age when there was very little government interest or control of doctors' activities. "Let your conscience be your guide" was literally the principle which controlled all that doctors wanted to do. Thus, he soon found ethylene to be superior to nitrous oxide and used it for ten years, from 1923 to 1933, and was the only doctor in Montreal to do so. It was during this time that he began to write articles for anaesthesia journals emphasizing anaesthetic techniques that would reduce anaesthetic risk. Dr. Waters introduced him to cyclopropane which he used from 1933 (the first Canadian to do so) to the end of his career. He wrote extensively about cyclopropane and became recognized as a world expert in its use. It was always his practice to carefully monitor respiration and record vital signs. It was with this background that he knew that he could produce muscle relaxation with curare and improve operating conditions for the surgeon.

As Chairman of the Department of Anaesthesia at McGill he felt that teaching had to be supplemented by research and he persuaded Sir Henry Dale and the Wellcome Trust to support a research professorship. Sir Gordon Robson set up the Department of Research in Anaesthesia which is now directed by Professor K. Kranjec.

Progress in anaesthesia, as in all fields, depends on communication between workers in the field and this led Dr. Griffith to develop an anaesthesia society in Montreal in cooperation with French Canadian doctors in Québec. He then set about organizing anaesthetists throughout Canada. He became the first president of the Canadian Anaesthetists' Society and served as a member of Council for the next 20 years. He was also chosen by Dr. McMechan to take an active part in the work of the International Anesthesia Research Society, which was the principal anaesthesia association prior to the founding of the American Society of Anesthesiologists. In the 1950's he became interested in the world-wide organization of anaesthetists and in 1956 led a delegation to Cuba, and in 1957 was chairman of a congress in London and one in Paris. He worked with representatives of several countries to create the World Federation of Societies of Anesthesiologists. He became its first President at the inaugural congress in Holland in 1955. At the second congress which was held in Toronto in 1959 he was given the permanent title of Founder-President. He accomplished all this while being a busy clinical anaesthetist, researcher and prestigious writer. His seventy-three publications to 1963 were collated in a book entitled "The Boundless Realm of Anaesthesiology" and presented to him in commemoration of the 21st anniversary of the use of curare.

In 1943 Dr. Griffith established the first post-operative recovery room in Canada which he believed may have been his major contribution to patient care. This was done in spite of considerable opposition by hospital authorities who claimed it was just a useless way to spend money. Another pioneering advance in patient care that he instituted at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital was the opening of an Intensive Care Unit in 1961.

The enormity of his energy becomes evident from his numerous activities which he carried on while acting as hospital administrator, chairman of the Department of Anaesthesia, and researcher. He was secretary of the Montreal Society of Anaes-
The prodigious efforts of this humble, quiet, unassuming but energetic man did not go unrecognized and he received numerous awards for his magnificent contributions to the expanding specialty of anaesthesia.

In 1922 Dr. Harold married Linda Aylen, a schoolmate, and they had a long and happy life together. He is survived by his wife of sixty-three years, by two daughters, Linda Mary Jacobson and Barbara Clark, and by five grandsons, one of whom is now a medical student at McGill, and by great grand-daughter, Anna. In addition, he had a special family from many national backgrounds: all those who were honoured to call him Uncle Harold.

It is fitting to quote Dr. Griffith who wrote, “I give thanks to God for giving me such a long and happy life, such a fine family and so many friends— a life that has been full of useful work and lots of fun.”

We salute and remember a friend, wise counselor, innovator, and loved physician, Harold Randall Griffith, OC MM MD CM FRCPC FFARCS.

- Distinguished Service Award, American Society of Anesthesiologists, 1959. (Only non-American to receive this award.)
- Founder-President, World Federation of Societies of Anesthesiologists, 1959.
- Ralph Waters Award, Illinois Society of Anesthesiology, 1970.
- Officer, Order of Canada, 1974.
- Honorary LLD, University of Saskatchewan, 1974.

Deirdre M.M. Gillies MB CHB FRCPC,
J. Earl Wynands, MD CM FRCPC,
Montreal, Quebec.

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Le docteur Harold Randall Griffith était l’un des plus grands contributeurs dans le domaine de la médecine. L’exploit le plus marquant de sa carrière était l’introduction des relaxants musculaires dans la pratique anesthésique le 23 janvier 1942. Ce jour là, il a rendu possible aux anesthésistes de procéder d’un grand pas vers la réduction de la morbidité et la mortalité permettant ainsi ce qu’un prend actuellement pour acquis dans le développement rapide de la chirurgie de toutes sortes. Les anesthésistes ont reconnu son exploit car très peu de médecins ont réalisé une aussi grande contribution dans la médecine au 20e siècle. Le livre, Arrows of Mercy de Phillip Smith, publié par Doubleday Canada Limitée 1969, est une biographie extensive de ce génie modeste qui a capturé l’admiration et l’affection de plusieurs qui, de leur vivant, ont traversé le même chemin que lui.

Harold Randall Griffith est né le 25 juillet 1894 et décédé le 7 mai 1985. Les deux dernières années de sa vie étaient marquées par une faiblesse progressive due à la maladie de Parkinson qu’il avait endurée avec le même courage qui l’a conduit jusqu’à quatre-vingt dix ans.

Il a obtenu son diplôme du High School of Montreal en 1910, a reçu son B.A. de l’Université McGill en 1914 et son M.D., C.M. en 1922. La faculté de médecine Hahnemann de Philadelphie lui a octroyé son diplôme de médecine homeo-