A Brief History of the Department of Surgery

by Dr. H. T. G. Williams

Soon after the establishment of the University of Alberta in 1908, the Faculty of Medicine saw its first class of 26 students (1913) gathered in what is now Queen Alexandra School. The Faculty provided a three-year course with one year in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences followed by two years of basic science. The clinical surgery course during second year was under the direction of Drs. William A. Wilson and Gordon C. Gray. Instruction took place at the Strathcona Hospital which later became the University Hospital. Students then moved to Eastern Canada to complete their clinical training.

After the First World War, the University realized Alberta needed a full course of medical instruction and so became the first complete Medical School west of Winnipeg. In 1922, Dr. Frank Hamilton Mewburn, living in Calgary at the time, accepted the Chairmanship of the new Department of Surgery and the Directorship of Surgical Services at the University Hospital.

Born in 1858 in Niagara Falls, Ontario, Dr. Mewburn graduated from McGill University, interned at Montreal General Hospital during William Osler’s time, then became the House Surgeon at the Winnipeg General Hospital. During the Riel Rebellion in 1885, he took charge of the Base Military Hospital. He eventually established his surgical reputation in Lethbridge where he worked for 27 years.

In 1913, at the age of 55, he moved to Calgary and limited his practice to surgery. Turned down for military service in the First World War, he moved to England (at his own expense) and became the Officer in Charge of a Surgical Division at the Military Hospital in Taplow near London. After the war, he returned to Calgary before accepting the call to come to Edmonton.

The late Dr. John Scott, Dean of the Faculty of Medicine in the 1950’s, offered this description of Colonel Mewburn: “He was an enthusiastic, colourful teacher and a rugged individualist with the forcefulness of manner and elegance of vocabulary that impressed his colleagues, students and his patients alike.”

Dr. Mewburn oversaw a faculty where the teaching of the first clinical year was in the outpatient department of the University Hospital. Students then attended the Misericordia and General Hospitals. The best teachers of surgery at the Royal Alexandra Hospital were also on the University Hospital staff. However, the relationship between town and gown was antagonistic for many decades and the food fights during the Edmonton Academy of Medicine December dinner were not friendly.

In 1929, Dr. Alexander Russell Munro succeeded Colonel Mewburn. Another McGill graduate, Dr. Munro, began work in 1910 at the General and Royal Alexandra Hospitals. During the First World War, he enlisted, spending two years in the surgical division of the Taplow Military Hospital.

Returning to Edmonton, he became surgical specialist to the Veteran’s Administration and practised at the Edmonton Military Hospital—the old Strathcona Hospital became the University Hospital in 1922. He was an important member of Colonel Mewburn’s teaching staff and while Chairman of Surgery, initiated the combined Rounds with Dr. Jamieson of the Department of Medicine.

Dr. Munro, well known in North America, became vice-president of the American College of Surgeons in 1933 and a member of the Board of Regents for many years. He retired in 1939 to devote himself to his surgical practice and Dr. Fulton Gillespie became Chair.

Born in Ontario, Dr. Gillespie came to Edmonton in 1906 with his parents (his father was a doctor). At the U of A, he received a B.A. and M.A. and developed into an accomplished pianist. He spent two years as a teacher in Dawson City before entering the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Toronto. He graduated in 1920 and began five years of postgraduate study in surgery, in Toronto and England, returning to Edmonton in 1925.

A kind, warm-hearted man, he was also a first class teacher devoted to his students. During the war years, he held the Department of Surgery together under the stress of a seriously depleted staff and an accelerated course load of year-long teaching. Dr. Gillespie became President of the...
An operating room scene from the 1920's Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada in 1947 but died suddenly in 1949.

The new Chairman was Dr. Howard Haverlock Hepburn. Trained as a general surgeon, he had been in Edmonton since 1919 devoting himself to developing a neurosurgical practice. He was a 1910 McGill graduate but the outbreak of war in 1914 found him in Berlin, continuing his neurological studies. Imprisoned as an enemy alien, he later escaped to England via Holland and enlisted in the RAMC — the first Canadian to do so. Sent to France, he received the Military Cross for Valor in the Field while serving as regimental medical officer with the 15th Scottish Division. He was greatly respected and admired for his skill as an operating surgeon. Besides being the first Chief of the Division of Neurosurgery, he did a fair amount of General and Plastic Surgery with ease and finesse.

Dr. Hepburn was the Chair of the Department on an interim basis until 1950 when a Search and Selection Committee chose Dr. Walter Mackenzie.

Dr. Mackenzie, born in Glace Bay, Nova Scotia, received his M.D. from Dalhousie University and his surgical training (full residency program) at the Mayo Clinic. The Mayo Clinic wanted him to stay but his father advised him to go West. He settled in Edmonton just before the Second World War, joining the Navy when hostilities began. After the war, he returned to Edmonton to build up a large, referred surgical practice.

Dr. Walter Mackenzie made three positive changes in the Department of Surgery.

First, he firmly established a modern Residency Training Program both in General Surgery and in the surgical specialties.

Secondly, he introduced surgical research to the U of A. He persuaded the Alberta Division of the Cancer Society to fund the construction of the J. S. McEachern Cancer Research Laboratory (named for a Calgary physician who established the Division) in 1952. This building, incorporated into the 1961 addition to the medical building, still forms part of the Surgical Medical Research Institute. Most of the Department of Surgery residents spent time training in the labs aided by a Research Fund created with grants from the Edmonton Civic Employees Welfare Chest Fund.

Thirdly, Dr. Mackenzie put the U of A's Department of Surgery on the map. He received many Honorary Fellowships and Honorary degrees and had influential surgical friends throughout the world whom he invited to Edmonton. Walter and Dorothy would put on wonderful dinner parties for them.

Dr. Mackenzie’s father ran an upscale hotel in Baddeck, Nova Scotia. This is a wonderful little town overlooking the Bras D’Or Lake and during the summer months, wealthy New England businessmen and their families patronized it. Walter’s father kept a diary with careful notes of any event that occurred. When a family returned to Baddeck, Walter’s father would put his arm around the young son of the house and say, “You remember that wonderful fish you caught last year — it was 7 3/4 pounds, I believe — see if you can do as well or better this year.” This impressed the family. Walter never forgot the lessons he learned from his father. I can remember at one American College meeting on the day the Board of Regents voted on the next President Elect, Walter said to me, “We must go along the Boardwalk to meet a few people.” The Atlantic City Boardwalk was the main connection between a series of hotels holding the meetings. It was an excellent place to meet people. So, for the next two hours, he and I approached the influential surgeons he knew. After introducing me, Walter would inquire after the health of the surgeon’s wife and children, mentioning them by name. Whether he was correct or not, I don’t know, but he was nominated as president-elect. He became the only Canadian to have been President of both the American College of Surgeons and the Royal College of Physicians of Canada.

In 1960, Dr. Mackenzie became Dean of the Faculty of Medicine and relinquished the Chair to Dr. Bob Macbeth.

Dr. Macbeth is an Alberta graduate who completed his surgical training in McGill. He and Cam Harrison were the first two surgeons appointed to a geographic full-time position in the Department of Surgery. He held the Chair for 15 years and successfully completed the work Walter Mackenzie began. When he took over, there were five well-defined Divisions within the Department of Surgery; during his tenure, he added three more.

Dr. Macbeth consolidated the training programs of the Divisions and arranged the formal affiliation of all the city’s general hospitals within the teaching program and did much to assuage any town and gown animosity. The Surgical Staff of all the city hospitals have made, are making, and will continue to make

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splendid contributions to surgical teaching.

Under Dr. Macbeth's able, enlightened and honest administration, the Department of Surgery became well developed by modern standards. Its record in undergraduate and graduate surgical teaching was high and all the residency training programs had far more applicants than positions. Nevertheless, before the end of his 15 years in the Chair, Bob Macbeth expressed certain concerns. The establishment of a number of specialty divisions had necessarily meant a reduction in the number of beds for General Surgery. As General Surgery was responsible for most of the undergraduate teaching and a good proportion of resident teaching, a further reduction in beds could have had a deleterious effect on the overall teaching function.

I took over the Chair from Bob Macbeth in 1975. I had graduated in Medicine from England's University of Liverpool and had received six years of resident training before coming to Edmonton in 1957. I spent one year in the research laboratory and another year as a Teaching Fellow with duties in the Division of Cardiovascular and Thoracic Surgery. I then joined Dr. Mackenzie and Dr. Willer in private practice for 15 years. Those were happy years and I am indebted to my associates for all the things they taught me.

From my observations and interest in teaching, I became convinced a three-person team of a surgeon, resident and medical student, with the full cooperation of the nursing staff could provide better care for surgical patients than a solo surgeon working with the nursing staff. Also, I considered it a great privilege, an honor, and an obligation to train the next generation of surgeons.

The planning of the new Health Sciences Centre (later the Walter C. Mackenzie Health Sciences Centre) consumed much of the Department of Surgery's time. The process was exciting, even exhilarating, but sometimes, extremely frustrating. On more than one occasion, the designers and planners changed so we would have begin again. One could not afford to miss meetings as it meant losing space or a facility to another department. In the end, I think our efforts were worthwhile.

The black clouds Dr. Macbeth saw on the horizon were now obvious. There had been a gradual reduction of surgical beds as the University Hospital contracted from nearly 1100 beds to 800 in the new hospital. Distributing these bed cuts throughout the Divisions was not easy.

Dr. Bryce Weir took over from me as the Chair of the Department of Surgery in 1986. Dr. Weir was a McGill graduate who had completed his neurosurgical training in Montreal and came to Edmonton, with very high credentials, to join the Division of Neurosurgery. He soon developed an excellent neurosurgical research laboratory. By the time he took the Chair, he was an international authority on cerebral aneurysms, subarachnoid hemorrhage and the resulting vasospasm that produced severe or irreversible brain damage.

Dr. Weir reorganized the Divisional structure within the Department of Surgery involving more city surgeons in its affairs. He also established Departmental Councils where members gathered once a year to discuss pertinent topics.

In 1987, Drs. Les Dushinski and Joe Mossey formulated the idea of endowing a chair in the Department of Surgery in the name of Dr. Walter Stirling Anderson. Their campaign was a great success. Government matched contributions from friends, colleagues and grateful patients.

During Dr. Weir's chairmanship, the financial squeeze continued as did bed closures. In 1991, an offer of Chair of Neurosurgery at the University of Chicago, probably the most prestigious neurosurgical appointment in North America, enticed him from the U of A.

Dr. Stewart Hamilton became the Chair. He had graduated in Medicine from McGill and completed his General Surgery training at the University of Alberta followed by special training in Critical Care Medicine. He is a clear thinker, good speaker, a good organizer and a very able surgeon who has a special interest in managing trauma and all aspects of critical care.

From the start, Dr. Hamilton has had it tough as the financial constraints continued. The regionalization of hospital care and the concentration of serious cases in the two main hospitals played havoc with undergraduate and resident education.

It is ironic we spent 25 years persuading Hospital Boards to restrict surgeons to working in one hospital and now, this tremendous advantage to patients which allows for the development of a team of surgeon, resident and student that works, learns and cares together, is lost. However, surgeons, by their very nature, are flexible and adaptable as witnessed by their 75 year history at the University of Alberta.