History of Canadian Anaesthesia

M. Digby Leigh (1904-1975)

It was late in 1942 that, as a medical officer in the Canadian Army, I first met Digby Leigh at the Children's Memorial Hospital in Montreal. There were four of us assigned to a "crash" course in anaesthesia, the instructors being Wesley Bourne, Harold R. Griffith and Leigh. Each of these teachers was a "character" in his own right, but Leigh was the youngest, 38 yr old at the time, and as dedicated a firebrand of an instructor each of us would ever meet.

Born in 1904 in Jersey, the Channel Islands, Leigh was brought up in British Columbia and received a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of British Columbia in 1927. He then entered medical school at McGill University, being granted an MD CM in 1932. Following a year of internship and a year of general surgery residency in Montreal, he apparently tired of career training and began a general practice in the city. However, he came under the influence of Wesley Bourne, and at his urging and recommendation was accepted into a three-year residency in anaesthesia under Ralph Waters at the University of Wisconsin in 1936. One of the instructors at that time was Emery Rovenstine, who later became Professor of Anesthesia at the New York University College of Medicine. Among his fellow residents were Virginia Apgar, Perry Volpitta who became Professor of Anesthesia at the Medical College of Georgia, and Bill Neff, a Canadian who went on to become Professor of Anesthesia at Stanford University.

Stimulated by the action and excitement of Wisconsin, Leigh returned to Montreal and plunged into the environment there as Director of Anaesthesia at the Children's Memorial Hospital. In a few years his teaching and innovative abilities made him a leading figure in anaesthetic circles. Those of us who were his students, even for a short time, will never forget his head-of-the-table antics as he led us, cajoling, manoeuvring, pleading with his forthright nasal twang, through the intricacies of mastering the art of providing anaesthesia for infants and children. While at the Children's, he fashioned a non-rebreathing valve for paediatric use and it spawned numerous replicas and modifications in the following few years.

As an outgrowth of his endeavours in Montreal, Leigh published, in 1948, in collaboration with Dr. Kay Belton, a book titled, "Pediatric Anesthesiology." There were seven reprintings through 1957, and in 1960 a second edition was published. It was a first in delineating the anaesthetic problems associated with caring for infants and children.

In pursuit of his career Leigh was attracted to Western Canada and in 1947 was appointed Director of Anaesthesia at the Vancouver General Hospital. Literally overnight, according to Dr. Eric Webb, eighteen anaesthesia machines arrived at the hospital, where previously there had been only two. It was a whirlwind next few years during which the status of anaesthesia grew in stature and respect. However, in 1954, recognizing that his appointment as department Chairman of Anaesthesia at the University of British Columbia was not in his immediate grasp, Leigh accepted the position as Director of Anesthesia at the Children's Hospital in Los Angeles and as Professor of Anesthesiology at the University of Southern California, positions which he held until his retirement in 1970.

His return to the teaching of paediatric anesthesia was heralded nationwide and his unique abilities were manifested to hundreds of students each year who attended the Annual Pediatric Conference in Los Angeles. Of particular importance was his recognition of the value of monitoring carbon dioxide in the anaesthesia circuit. Leigh was the forerunner of a technique which has become virtually mandatory in today's anaesthesia practice.

In the last years of his life he was beset with serious illnesses and he died in 1975 in Palm Springs, California. Although perhaps not the first paediatric anaesthetist in Canada (Dr. Charles H. Robson (1884-1969) was Chief Anaesthetist at the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto from 1919-50), Dr. M. Digby Leigh certainly can be ranked as one of the founders of modern paediatric anaesthesia as a subspecialty of anaesthesiology.

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