

History of Canadian Anaesthesia

Dr. William Webster: Pioneer Manitoba anaesthetist



If, as Henry Sigrist claimed, history is the compass that guides us into the future, then Dr. William Webster (1865–1934) was the man who guided the destiny of anaesthesia in Winnipeg. Appointed the first professor of anaesthesia at the University of Manitoba medical school in 1919 and elected president of the Canadian Society of Anaesthetists for 1922–1923, Webster made his mark on Canadian anaesthesia as clinician, researcher and educator.

Webster was born in Manchester, England, in 1865. After moving to Canada in 1888, he enrolled in Manitoba Medical College in 1891, paying his tuition by teaching rural students during his summer vacations. After graduating in 1895 and spending two years in general practice, he returned to Manchester to study pathology and was appointed pathologist to the Winnipeg General Hospital in 1898.

However, in 1906, Webster made an unusual decision: he would devote himself entirely to anaesthesia. Succeeding Dr. William Chestnut as honorary anaesthetist to the Winnipeg General, he was the first full-time anaesthetist in the West. During his time as a student and an anaesthetist, operations at the General increased from 300 in 1891 to 1,000 in 1900 and over 8,000 in 1934. Operations became more complex and invasive; the first craniotomy in Winnipeg, for example, was performed in 1929.

Webster's interests embraced much of anaesthesia in the early years of the 20th century. He was the first to practice spinal anaesthesia in western Canada, which in those days was associated with a mortality of the order of one in 500. Hypotension was one problem; to make up for the lack of intravenous therapy, he simply gave fluids by mouth before surgery. He did not use tracheal intubation, nor was he convinced of the safety of carbon dioxide absorption techniques, essential to the use of the new agent, cyclopropane. Webster did, however, describe elaborate equipment for insufflation.

Webster was interested also in research. He reported on the outcome of induction of anaesthesia with ethyl

chloride in 1,800 patients and on the morbidity of 7,000 anaesthetics. A friend of the American anesthesiologists Elmer McKesson and Frank McMechan, Webster was familiar with the progress of anaesthesia outside Canada as well as in his own country. Webster's role as an educator was unique: his textbook on *The Science and Art of Anaesthesia*, published in 1924, remains the only textbook written by a Canadian covering all aspects of the specialty.

William Webster was one of nature's gentlemen. Of medium height and slim build, he bore himself nobly, as befitted a colonel in World War I, in which he commanded No. 4 Field Ambulance and was awarded the Distinguished Service Order. Nicknamed Fuzzy on account of his sparse hair and neatly trimmed white beard – to house which he designed a special surgical mask – he neither drank nor smoked, and regularly walked the two miles from his house to the hospital. He was happily married to his Scottish sweetheart with whom he had two sons and a daughter, of whom two are still living, aged 92 and 78.

Work did not consume him; his hobbies included hunting, target shooting, cars and boating. He was one of the first doctors in Manitoba to own a car and the first president of the Manitoba Motor League. After the war his salary was reduced by half in the depression and would not permit him to afford both a car and a boat. He chose the latter that led to his death in October 1934. It was a cool day, the last day of the season. The engine backfired; a fire broke out and he struggled, alone, to save the boat. Firefighters found him, conscious, fighting the fire in the engine room.

William Webster was one of a distinguished group of physicians whose work earned for the University of Manitoba a well-deserved reputation. In Manitoba he blazed a trail that his successors have been proud to follow.

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