



History of Canadian Anaesthesia

Ernest H. Watts (1904-1975)

Ernest (Ernie) Haynes Watts, born in Brandon, Manitoba, on August 2, 1904, was a pioneer in anaesthesia, particularly in what he achieved in Western Canada. A graduate in medicine from the University of Alberta in 1930, he was introduced to anaesthesia by Dr. Jack Blezard, then head of anaesthesia there. Watts took his training in anaesthesia at McGill University, in one of the few residencies of that era. At McGill he was taught by Wesley Bourne, Harold Griffith and Charles Stewart, but he also spent some time at the University of Wisconsin with Ralph Waters and at the Mayo Clinic with John Lundy. Watts' training was therefore as thorough and varied as any at that time, and he joined the best of the old with that of the new.

Despite the many lucrative opportunities presented to him in eastern Canada and in the United States, Watts returned to Edmonton in 1934. He had been enticed back by Dr. A.R. Monroe, a senior surgeon, with the assurance that he would have the Department of Surgery's support in eventually setting up a full-time department of anaesthesia. At that time anaesthesia came under the Division of Therapeutics in the Department of Medicine, and the anaesthetics were given by physicians who were, for the most part, general practitioners. With Watts as head, the Department of Anaesthesia was eventually established in 1936, when Blezard moved to London to head up the Department of Anaesthesia at the University of Western Ontario.

Although Watts was likely the first formally trained anaesthetist in Western Canada and highly competent, his progress up the academic ladder was slow, and even his appointment as a Clinical Professor in 1947 was not a full-time one. But he made himself felt through the force of his personality. He was the kind of person who could enter a chaotic operating room and turn it into tranquillity by means of his very presence and his self-assurance. He was the real captain of the ship; his skill as well as his character commanded the respect of his surgical colleagues. Watts was a master clinician and one of those rare teachers who could teach the art of anaesthesia. When the Royal College recognized and estab-

lished standards for training, he developed a successful residency program, which flourished largely because of his excellence as a teacher.

Early in the Second World War Watts attempted to enlist in the Army, but he was not accepted because of arthritis; so he joined the Reserve. But he wished to play a more active role, and in 1943, aided by friends and colleagues, he succeeded in enlisting in the Royal Canadian Navy, in which he served on the East Coast until 1945. He then returned to his position in Edmonton.

Watts soon became active in organized anaesthesia. He joined the Canadian Anaesthetists' Society soon after its founding in 1943, and was elected to Council as the Western representative later that year. He soon facilitated the development of the society in Western Canada, the first western divisional meeting being held in Edmonton in 1946. He was also one of the first Canadians to become active in the American Society of Anesthesiologists and in the International Anesthesia Research Society. He contributed much of his time to the business of various committees of the Alberta College of Physicians and Surgeons. Despite periods of illness, he continued to participate in the affairs of the Canadian Anaesthetists' Society, becoming President in 1951.

Ernie Watts' contributions to Canadian anaesthesia were not as full as he would have liked, for he became severely disabled by rheumatoid arthritis. It is doubtful whether he ever knew a pain-free day. The ravages of the disease progressed, and in 1950 and 1951 he spent much of his time in hospital. Illness led him to move to Phoenix, Arizona. His illness did not prevent him from building up a large practice there – or from serving as the Society's President. Nor did it prevent him from enjoying activities outside of anaesthesia. Watts was the type of person who gave his all to the profession and his colleagues and his patients.

Watts died on August 3, 1975. His contributions, like those of Webster, Freeze and Leech, greatly enhanced the development of anaesthesia in Western Canada.

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