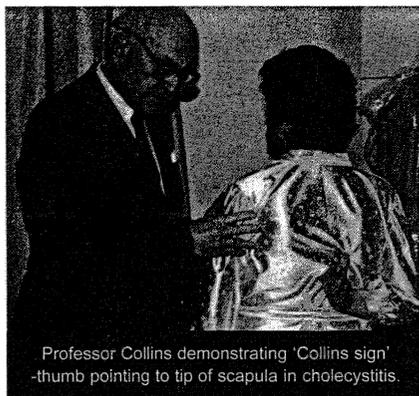


An Appreciation

Patrick G Collins (1923-99)



Professor Collins demonstrating 'Collins sign' - thumb pointing to tip of scapula in cholecystitis.

Patrick 'Paddy' Collins, Professor of Surgery at the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, was the most charismatic of men, with charm, wit, intelligence and a passionate commitment to surgery.

A native of Cork City he graduated in Medicine in

1947 from University College Cork with a first class honours degree. That in itself was not unexpected as he had achieved similar distinction in all his other examinations throughout his university course. Paddy travelled to Britain for his surgical training, and fortunately for Irish surgery, his journey unlike that of so many of his generation, ended not in separation but in his eventual return to Ireland as consultant surgeon to The Charitable Infirmary, Jervis Street, Dublin.

His early years as a journeyman saw him travelling between Cork, Cardiff, London and Derby. Britain in those early post-war years, with the health service experiencing the revolutionary changes, which culminated in the NHS, was a demanding testing ground for a young Irish trainee. This phase of his life showed that he was possessed of Sainte-Beauve's most needed qualities of doctors, 'science, esprit d'observation, maturité force, un peu de dureté'.

The defining years (1954-59) were to see Paddy working with three masters, Norman Tanner, the legendary gastric surgeon, Dick Cattell of the Lahey Clinic, Boston who introduced him to what was to prove a life-long interest, reconstruction of the bile ducts, and WJ Lytle of hernia fame. These men were destined to become lifelong friends and models.

Paddy returned to Ireland with consummate clinical skills and an abiding interest in surgical education and training. He was greatly influenced by the 'mentoring' approach of Lytle and Cattell, which involved careful supervision of young surgeons in peri-operative care of surgical patients, based on sound knowledge of applied physiology and in the performance of surgical procedures. Countless young surgeons but especially those on the Irish Higher Surgical Training were lifelong beneficiaries of this demanding and, for its time, unusual approach.

"Come to the edge," he said. "We are afraid," they said.

"Come to the edge". They came, he pushed, they flew.

Paddy was a wonderful bedside teacher in the best traditions of the Dublin School. His abilities in this regard were recognised not only by the undergraduate students of the Royal College of Surgeons but also by the postgraduate doctors who flocked to his Sunday morning ward rounds in the 'Jerv'. The college also recognised these unique educational qualities and ultimately appointed him as Professor of Surgery, a position

which he adorned and of which he was most proud.

The college and its professor were, in truth, extra-ordinarily matched – the former with its liberal traditions and the latter with his innate humanism. He served the college in many different roles - teacher, examiner in undergraduate and postgraduate examinations, organiser of training and after retirement as member of the Council. His involvement in the Irish Senior Registrar Scheme was crucial to its success not least because of his known commitment but also because of his reputation for fairness and lack of partisanship, important qualities when establishing a new order of things.

One of Paddy Collins' most important insights was that he recognised a pivotal role for the keeping of critical company in the prevention of professional isolation and stagnation. He was justly proud of his role as a founder member of the Irish Surgical Discussion Group, which brings together twice a year rural and urban based surgeons. Here one learned much, both in formal and informal sessions, which frequently drifted late into the night.

'I get wisdom day and night turning darkness into light.'

As an initiate in this or the other great club of travellers, one was always uncertain as to whether one's role was that of Pangur Ban or his cat, that is, the watcher or the watched. Paddy was also uniquely supportive of his surgical colleagues in his willingness to 'help out' with difficult problems. This led to an extraordinary practice in the surgery of difficult problems of the biliary system. Qualities, not readily defined, are required for such challenges:

'For this is imaginations other place, where only necessary things are done, with the supreme and grave dexterity that ignores technique; with proper grace informing a correct compassion, that performs its love and makes it live.'

Paddy's commitment to these patients with their complex and often lifelong problems established him as the compassionate surgeon and as the acknowledged 'professor of difficult surgery'. His abilities were recognised also by the many international societies and colleges who invited him to either sit on their ruling councils or to act as an external examiner. One suspects that he most appreciated his role as a Governor of the American College of Surgeons.

His most important contributions to the surgical literature were in the area of biliary surgery. His observations on the physiological consequences of the external loss of bile and on primary closure of the common bile duct are of enduring importance.

Professor Collins's professional commitments were thus numerous and demanding. His wife Kate with a unique understanding of the surgical psyche derived from her experience as an operating theatre sister was a constant support in all his endeavours. A man of great talents and courage he could rightly say at the end of life's journey:

'Vixi et quem dederat cursum fortuna peregi' ('I have lived and covered the course allotted me by fortune').

David Bouchier-Hayes