

Dr. William Waugh (1851–1936): promoter of change in nineteenth century medical education and practice

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Dr. William Waugh (1851–1936), Western University Archives, A00-071-003.

SUMMARY

Dr. William E. Waugh (1851–1936) witnessed and actively participated in many changes in medical education and practice during his 6 decades in medicine. Trained as a surgeon and general practitioner, Waugh practised medicine in London, Ont., during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Early in his career, he embraced the new field of microbiology; refused outdated practices, such as bleeding; and dared to form a medical school despite strong criticism. Waugh was one of the founders of the Western University medical school, and he served various teaching and administrative roles in addition to maintaining a successful practice. He reminded students of the role of the physician's senses, which he cautioned were in danger of being eclipsed, rather than supplemented, by the diagnostic instruments being adopted into clinical practice.

Dubbed the “grand old man” of surgery by his junior medical colleagues, William Ebenezer Waugh (1851–1936) witnessed and actively participated in many changes in medical education and practice during his 6 decades in medicine. Trained as a surgeon and general practitioner, Waugh practised medicine in London, Ont., during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Early in his career, he embraced the new field of microbiology; refused outdated practices, such as bleeding; and dared to form a medical school despite strong criticism. It was Waugh who, arriving by horse and buggy on Oct. 1, 1882, delivered the first lecture in Western University's medical program in a converted cottage that became the original medical school building. Serving multiple faculty and administrative posts, Waugh maintained the longest connections with the university among its elite group of medical school founders.¹

At a time when individuals practised medicine after having undergone various types of education, Waugh pursued training as a regular or allopathic physician. In 1868, he apprenticed locally with Alexander Anderson, who had trained in Scotland and was a member of the Royal College of Surgeons of England. One year later, Waugh headed to medical school at McGill University for 3 years. One of his classmates at McGill was William Osler, who strongly encouraged fellow students to use the microscope, a some-

what new instrument in medical schools at this time. Osler regularly came to class with new specimens for demonstration, to the benefit of his peers, after which Waugh maintained a lifelong advocacy of its use. While they were medical students, Osler received a special prize for his work with the microscope, and Waugh, as a student prosector in anatomy, won a prize for dissection. Graduating alongside Osler in 1872, Waugh left McGill as the silver medalist of his medical class. What was it like to be a classmate of William Osler, who many would soon idolize as the “Father of modern medicine”? Reflecting on this 60 years later, Waugh stated, “Osler seemed to us, just an ordinary student and his later work was, I think more or less of a surprise to us who were his contemporaries ... no one dreamed that he would become so important a person.”²

With medical degree in hand, Waugh returned to London, Ont., with his microscope and dissection prize bust to practise medicine. The city's population of about 20 000 people were served by roughly 20 physicians, several of whom were homeopathic practitioners, all with reportedly busy practices. During the latter part of the nineteenth century, Londoners faced problems with diphtheria, typhoid fever and periodic malaria bouts in addition to ongoing cases of flu, fevers, respiratory and abdominal problems, farming injuries, and so forth. Waugh spoke out against the practice of bleeding, an outdated belief in removing excess blood to



At the McGill University medical school, William Waugh was a student prosector in anatomy, and he received this prize of a plaster bust displaying a dissection of the head and neck for his work. Waugh graduated as the silver medalist of his medical class in 1872. Medical Artifact Collection at Western University, 2004.288.01.01



The monocular compound microscope used by William Waugh while a McGill medical student as well as a practising physician in London, Ont. Waugh donated the microscope to the Western University medical school in 1922. Medical Artifact Collection at Western University, 2004.340.01.01

rebalance body fluids as a means to restore health, which apparently a handful of London physicians still performed as a “cure-all” treatment.² Waugh’s training at McGill made him a firm believer in the germ theory that was shaping medical practice. The 1869 Ontario Medical Act set up a new College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario that, through examining would-be practitioners and university graduates before granting medical licenses, contributed to higher (and safer) scientific standards in medicine.

During his career, Waugh witnessed the introduction of many new diagnostic instruments into medical practice, and this seemed to worry him. On the one hand, it was Waugh who encouraged the use of the microscope when many London physicians did not own one. The stethoscope remained the sole diagnostic aid for the physician for many years, until the greater use of the clinical thermometer during the 1870s. Over the next 60 years, clinicians adopted and used a growing number of diagnostic instruments, such as ophthalmoscopes, blood pressure kits, radiography machines, bronchoscopes, electrocardiography machines and more. Waugh lamented how the senses were not being used in diagnosis in the same way. In 1932, he stated that “the older physicians could see more, hear more and especially feel more than the generations that came later because they, in their training, had not had the use of the instruments of precision which are so common today.”² He certainly did not suggest that

physicians not use these diagnostic tools, but quietly reminded students of the role of the physician’s senses.

In 1936, Waugh died at the age of 85. His funeral was a “Who’s Who” of the London medical community, attended by Drs. Edwin Seaborn, J.A. Macgregor, W.J. Weekes, George Ramsay, and others. Predeceased by his wife Margaret, Waugh left his estate to their only child, Jean, who later donated the family house to the university in recognition of her father’s long service and connections to the medical school.³ A calm, determined man, Waugh was well liked by colleagues and students. He received various medical society honours during his lifetime, and thereafter was warmly remembered as a distinguished surgeon, medical practitioner and pioneer teacher of Western University’s medical school.

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