

Remembering Dr. Frederick Griffith Pearson

Richard J. Finley, MD

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Correspondence to:

R.J. Finley
Department of Surgery
University of British Columbia
910 W. 10th Ave, Rm 3100
Vancouver BC V5Z 4E3
rjfinley@shaw.ca

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SUMMARY

Canada has lost a remarkable surgeon and leader. Dr. Frederick Griffith “Griff” Pearson, aged 90, died in Kitchener, Ont., on Aug. 10, 2016, surrounded by his wife, Hilppa Pearson, and his family.

Canada has lost a remarkable surgeon and leader. Dr. Frederick Griffith “Griff” Pearson, aged 90, died in Kitchener, Ont., on Aug. 10, 2016, surrounded by his wife, Hilppa Pearson, and his family.

Griff was born and raised in Toronto as the son of an optometrist and an enlightened mother. A bright student, he attended the University of Toronto, where his science teacher, Dr. Kroll, encouraged him to become a physician. In 1949, he graduated as the silver medalist in medicine at the University of Toronto. After his internship at the Toronto General Hospital (TGH), he spent a year in general practice in Port Colbourne, Ont. He then returned to the University of Toronto, where he did research under Wilfred G. Bigelow, studying hypothermia for cardiac surgery and the “mysteries of hibernation.” His love of the North drew him to the secluded town of Wawa, Ont., for 3 years where the lack of speciality care exposed him to all aspects of medicine, surgery and obstetrics. He thrived in this environment and developed his great sense of always putting the patient first. In 1955, he returned to complete his general surgery residency at the University of Toronto. In 1957, while a resident, he represented surgery in the establishment of a 4-bed respiratory failure unit at TGH, the first in Canada.

After becoming a fellow of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada in 1958, he was advised by Drs. Fred Kergin and Robert Janes to pursue further studies in pulmonary and esophageal surgery. He received a McLaughlin travelling fellowship that allowed him to work with Mr. Ronald Belsey at the Frenchay Hospital in Bristol, UK. Not only did Mr. Belsey teach Griff the nuances of esophageal surgery, he engrained in him the importance of careful lifelong follow-up of patients undergoing new operations. The information garnered from these clinics allowed Griff to improve on Mr. Belsey’s Mark IV hiatus hernia operation by adding the Collis gastroplasty to lengthen the esophagus in patients with a foreshortened esophagus. In 1960, Griff travelled to Copenhagen, Denmark, to learn about prolonged mechanical ventilation by positive pressure ventilation. He observed severe injuries to the larynx and trachea that led him to develop a lifelong interest in tracheal and laryngeal surgery. In Stockholm, Sweden, he visited Dr. Eric Carlens to investigate the use of a double-lumen (Carlens) tube to provide single-lung ventilation during thoracotomies. Dr. Carlens also showed Griff the use of a mediastinoscope to biopsy paratracheal, hilar and subcarinal lymph nodes in the staging of lung cancer. On his return to Toronto, Griff championed this technique throughout North America to prevent futile thoracotomies in patients with unresectable mediastinal lung cancer metastasis. With the help of Dr. Bob Ginsberg, he formed the first surgical group in Toronto to participate and lead a North American cooperative group (The Lung Cancer Study Group). Ever since, the Toronto team has been a leader

in clinical trials of lung and esophageal cancer treatment in North America.

In 1960, Griff returned to TGH, where he quickly established himself as a thoughtful clinical surgeon and investigator. In 1967, he joined Dr. Norman Delarue in starting the first Division of Thoracic Surgery in Canada. Griff's students called him "the Pied Piper of thoracic surgery."

His cheerfulness, curiosity, sense of wonder, clear communication skills and surgical agility attracted surgeons, physicians and nurses from around the world to join the TGH thoracic team. Griff established a training program in thoracic surgery that was recognized by the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada in 1977 as a separate specialty. This program has been a template for training programs throughout North America and the world. The majority of graduates of the "Toronto Program" are now leaders in the field of general thoracic surgery in Canada and throughout North and South America, Europe and Asia.

Griff established the first research laboratory in thoracic surgery in Canada. The Thoracic Surgical Research Laboratories have made seminal contributions in airway surgery, lung transplantation and lung oncology. Based on research discoveries in the lab, the TGH lung transplant team of Joel Cooper, Bill Nelems, Tom Todd, Mel



Dr. Frederick Griffith "Griff" Pearson salmon fishing in Haida Gwaii, British Columbia, 2007. Photo used with permission from Dr. Bill Nelems.

Goldberg and Alex Patterson carried out the first successful lung transplant in the world in 1983. Under the leadership of Drs. Shaf Keshavjee and Tom Waddell, this group continues to innovate in lung transplantation and tissue regeneration and now carries out more than 120 lung transplants a year.

Always humble, Griff was

honoured by being appointed as the surgeon-in-chief at TGH, the president of the American Association of Thoracic Surgeons, a member of the Order of Canada and a honorary fellow of 5 international thoracic societies. Griff was the lead editor of the first and second editions of the popular textbook *Pearson's Thoracic and Esophageal Surgery*. Recently, he coauthored *Evolution of Thoracic Surgery in Canada* with Drs. Jean Deslauriers and Bill Nelems.

Griff's greatest legacy was as a teacher and mentor. He had a clear understanding of the practice of thoracic surgery and all of its nuances. His ethics, teaching and discoveries continue to influence thoracic surgeons around the world. Canada has truly lost a surgical genius.

Affiliation: From the Department of Surgery, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC.

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