Portraits from Memory

13—Professor Robert Douglas Lockhart, MD, FRSE (1894-1987)

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The very first instruction in medicine that I received came from R D Lockhart; and I carry his advice with me still in the shape of a penknife in my jacket pocket. It happened thus. In 1925, along

with others, I passed the pre-registration examination in physics and chemistry while still at school and was thus able to go straight into anatomy. I had to drop Greek, but not Latin, during my last two years in school in order to do this. It was not an easy decision, made against the advice of both my headmaster and my form master. The latter taught "the classics—the humanities" in a manner well suited to the parade ground. He had in fact done noble and gallant service in the 1914-18 war as a non-commissioned officer.

"How could you drop Greek just to study physics and chemistry?" he shouted at me. "Stethos—the chest; skopein—to see or examine, both Greek words—hence stethoscope, an instrument in daily use by doctors!"

But, despite falling into grave disfavour, I dropped the Greek and got the physics and chemistry I needed to go straight into anatomy—for six instead of five terms. That was rated a good move, because the stiffest hurdle on the way to becoming a doctor was the second professional examination in anatomy and physiology. This was taken after only five terms of anatomy by those who had to do a term of elementary physics and chemistry at the university before proceeding to the real stuff of medicine—anatomy and biology.

Body lines

Therefore, on my very first day in October 1925 at the University of Aberdeen, along with some half dozen other shrinking timid creatures from school, I went "down the drain" to the practical anatomy classroom. This was, in fact, the dissecting room. Six dead bodies lay there under shrouds, stiff and cold. Notices on the wall assigned the novices to "arm" or "leg" on one of the six bodies. We hesitantly gathered round, wondering how we should ever venture to handle a dead body, let alone dissect it.

Into our midst breezed Robert Douglas Lockhart, an ex-Royal Navy officer, now lecturer in anatomy.

"Let's see now," he said. "You're not scared of dead bodies, are you? But you wonder how to begin." How right he was. "Let's get on with surface markings, then," he said. "You are an arm. Run your hand over this ridge. That is the right clavicle or collar bone. On the left side is the other clavicle. See and feel the notch where they join the sternum or breast bone. Run your finger up towards the head from this notch till you meet an obstruction. That is the lower end of the larynx or voice box. Stop there. Just below that point, and at no other, you can save the life of a person choking to death from laryngeal obstruction—for example, from swallowing a fruit stone or from diphtheria affecting the larynx. Hold the trachea or windpipe steady, and stick in your knife just there. You'll have saved a life by doing an emergency tracheotomy to let in air. Nobody can do it who does not know his surface anatomy or carry a knife. There's no time to call the police, a doctor, or an ambulance. It's you and your knife—or nobody!"

Brought to life

From that moment I began to be a doctor. Right to this day I have a penknife in my left hand jacket pocket, ready for just this emergency. I never heard another word about this life saving operation during my five years of undergraduate medical study. But I was glad to recall it and act upon Lockhart's instruction when, eight years later, as a fever hospital medical officer, I met a child choking to death in an ambulance. That child owed its life to Lockhart. With him, anatomy was never dull: "This is the foundation of your craft." He taught us in lectures and demonstrations with such vivid enthusiasm for the subject and its applications to practice that I can never forget my personal debt to his teaching. He opened all his lectures with a roll call.

In anatomy we had a viva every three weeks. It was conducted by the professor, by Lockhart, or by one of the assistants. Lockhart's vivas were by far the most memorable. He would put a question; and the student, not knowing the answer, would look up to the roof.

"God bless the Duke of York!" Lockhart would call out. "Look down at the body—the answer is there, not written on the ceiling!"

He was a beautiful dissector; in a few strokes he would clear away the chaos of a mismanaged part and reveal a picture as clear and as memorable as that in any text book. What a stimulus he was—and how he made his subject live. It was no surprise when he was wooed away to Birmingham as professor in 1931, but there was great pleasure when he was recalled as professor to Aberdeen in 1938. He retired in 1965.

He was a bachelor. One can only guess at how many maidens must have sighed and longed for the message that never came. For he was as lively and attractive in his physical presence as in his spoken word. But his care and affection were devoted to his widowed mother and shared only with his splendid roses and rhododendrons.

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