



## OBITUARIES

## Gordon Edyvean Heard

Malcolm H Wheeler



The art and science of surgery were never more effectively demonstrated than as seen in the clinical practice of the Cardiff vascular surgeon, Gordon Edyvean Heard. In the 1960s vascular surgery was still in the early stages of development. The major arteries of the body can be diseased with atherosclerosis and other intrinsic defects resulting in dilatation (aneurysm) or blockage. Unblocking and repair or replacement of arteries became possible with the development of new surgical techniques and the development of methods for replacing damaged blood vessels.

Rupture of an aneurysm of the major aortic artery, either in the chest or, more commonly, in the abdomen, is a life threatening emergency requiring prompt surgical intervention. In the UK, one in 25 men between the ages of 65 and 75 have an abdominal aortic aneurysm, with rupture causing 6000 deaths each year.

Heard was at the forefront of the development of this new vascular surgical specialty. He brought to it great surgical expertise for those patients who came to Cardiff, but he recognised that in the large, sparsely populated area of Wales there needed to be immediately available local services. Every hospital in Wales could not have a dedicated vascular surgeon but he ensured that in every major district there was a general surgeon whom he had trained to provide immediate and lifesaving care. There is no doubt that many patients throughout the principality owed their lives to Gordon Heard's superb teaching and training of junior staff.

Gordon Heard was born on 23 February 1926 in Rhiwbina, Cardiff, the second son of a geologist at Cardiff University. Several particular events in his life may have been influential in his determination and ability to become a surgeon. In 1939, at the age of 13 and at the outbreak of the war, he became seriously ill with an infection, osteomyelitis, of the right tibia and became a patient in the Cardiff Royal Infirmary. He later wrote: "These were the days before penicillin when the condition often led to loss of life or loss of limb. I was lucky . . . avoiding both, but facing a long period of invalidity undergoing repeated surgical operations in the ensuing three years." It was obviously an experience that made a big impression on him, and he wrote some years later that the experience had led to a change in his

childhood aspirations from civil engineering to medicine—"No, not medicine but surgery," he firmly stated.

His schooling at City of Cardiff High School for Boys was seriously interrupted, but he managed matriculation on time and success in the higher certificate led to the award of a City of Cardiff scholarship, a Craddock Wells exhibition, and entrance to the Welsh National School of Medicine in 1943. "From then on," he said, "all my efforts were singlemindedly aimed at surgery."

A year later, another important event occurred in his life, one that was likely to have strengthened his resolve: the early death of his father, who was taken ill with pancreatic cancer on a field trip in 1944 and died soon afterwards. Gordon would only have been 18.

Gordon Heard continued having problems with osteomyelitis until 1946 and was one of the first civilians to be successfully treated with penicillin.

He was, however, an exceptional student and was awarded the Alfred Sheen prize in anatomy and physiology and the Willie Seager medal in pathology and bacteriology before qualifying as a doctor in 1949.

After qualifying he volunteered for the Home Guard and subsequently, as a young doctor, served between 1950 and 1952 as a captain in the Royal Army Medical Corps on the surgical wards of the Royal Victoria Military Hospital in Netley, Southampton, at the time when soldiers were being returned injured from the Korean war. He used to joke that his only overseas posting during his military service was a two week period on the Isle of Wight.

During this period of serving King and Country, Heard passed the primary fellowship examination for the Royal College of Surgeons, an important milestone on the road to a career in surgery. He trained in surgery in Cardiff and at the Hammersmith Hospital, London, under one the leading UK surgeons, Ian Aird, and became a fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons of England in 1954.

In 1958 he was awarded a fellowship to the US at Michigan State University, Ann Arbor. After a year he returned to Cardiff. While in the US he had developed an interest in neurofibromatosis and nerve sheath tumours, which formed the basis for his masters thesis in surgery, which was awarded with distinction and resulted in an invitation from the RCS in London to give the prestigious Hunterian lecture in 1962.

He was appointed senior lecturer in the surgical unit in Cardiff in 1961 and consultant surgeon to the Cardiff United Hospitals in 1963. He was the first to develop a specialist service in vascular surgery in Wales and remained a leader in this field right up to his retirement. He spent almost the whole of his

professional life contributing to surgical services in Cardiff and was consulted widely on his seminal work and authoritative opinions on the management of infected vascular grafts, a much feared and dangerous complication of vascular surgery associated with significant mortality and morbidity risk.

Although there were several options available to manage this problem Gordon Heard pioneered and promoted treatment by graft excision and replacement bypass through uninfected tissue planes, a method which is still highly recommended today.

His role as a surgical teacher and mentor were fundamental aspects of his clinical and surgical practice. As a teacher of operative surgery Gordon Heard was unsurpassed. His exemplary technical skill and attention to every detail, no matter how minute, served as a true model of excellence.

He would impress upon his surgical registrars the importance of surgical judgment and would frequently say that it is often more difficult to know when not to operate rather than when to operate.

He was a supremely skilled surgeon who invariably left an indelible impression on those who were privileged to work for and with him.

Gordon Heard was a tall confident man, always immaculately dressed in suit and white coat, his distinguished appearance and imposing presence commanding respect.

When writing his precise operation notes at the end of a lengthy vascular procedure, he always carefully illustrated the essentials of the vascular reconstruction. These simple line drawings served not only as an important addition to the written notes but also provided valuable teaching guidance for the surgical trainees on the firm.

His contribution to vascular surgery in Britain was recognised by his election in 1981 as president of the Vascular Surgical Society of Great Britain and Ireland, of which he was a founder member. The meeting held in Cardiff during his presidency showed two other areas in which he excelled, as an organiser and as a raconteur and after dinner speaker. In fact, he invited George Thomas the then speaker of the House of Commons to speak at the annual dinner of the society. On rising to his feet to speak after him, the Viscount Tonypandy was heard to say: "That's a difficult act to follow."

Gordon Heard was elected to the court of examiners of the RCS England in 1980 and became chairman of the court in 1986. He

became president of the Welsh Surgical Society in 1987 and later chairman of the Surgical Advisory Committee (SAC) in Wales.

He retired from surgery on 31 September 1987. On his retirement, it was written about him that his contribution to surgery as a whole in Cardiff was great. It was said that much of the effective element of organisation of surgical services in Cardiff at that time stemmed from his ideas and his period as chairman of the surgical division. It read: "He was notorious for his strongly held views [according to reputation he mellowed with age], yet those views [it continued] were proved right by the passage of time with remarkable frequency. Gordon Heard will be remembered as a true all-rounder—a superb clinical surgeon, a maker of prize winning films and videos, a true academic in his search for better knowledge and technique, and an administrator who analysed problems clearly and acted resolutely to try to correct deficiencies."

He was as dedicated a family man as he was a surgeon. He had three children and three grandchildren and was very much a central pillar of family life. He was keen on sailing, skiing and fly fishing when not working, and he had a very long and happy retirement with his wife, Kate, whom he married when he was in the US and who survives him.

He took up woodturning and cabinet making, producing the most beautiful Windsor chairs and much inlaid veneer furniture, of which he was justifiably very proud. It was something that gave him great pleasure for many years. He liked working with wood, he said, because it did not bleed.

When he decided to discontinue this pastime, he stated that the reason was very simple: his reduced dexterity would no longer permit him to achieve perfection. That straightforward statement, referring to the constant quest for perfection, very eloquently summarised Gordon Heard's approach to so many things in his life and especially surgery.

## Biography

Vascular surgeon Cardiff (b 1926; q 1949; FRCS Eng), died from pneumonia on 24 November 2018

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