

Surgical History

“The Professor”, William Steward Halsted: A legend

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William Steward Halsted (1852 – 1922), more than any other surgeon, set the scientific tone for this most important period in surgical history. He moved surgery from the melodramatics of the 19th century operating “theatre” to the starkness and sterility of the modern operating “room”, commingled with the privacy and soberness of the research laboratory.

New Yorker W. S. Halsted was awarded an MD in 1877 by the Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons. In 1890 he was appointed the first surgeon-in-chief of the John Hopkins Hospital and was named the first professor of surgery in 1892.¹

As a surgeon Halsted’s most notable contributions were in development of the technique of radical mastectomy, the repair of inguinal hernia and advancement of bowel anastomosis. Halsted’s methods consisted of strict aseptic technique, gentle handling of tissue, use of the finest silk suture, small stitches, low tension, and complete closure of wounds whenever possible. He will perhaps be best remembered for his introduction of the use of surgical gloves. Developed by the Goodyear Rubber Company, the gaunts were made to protect the hands of his scrub nurse, Caroline Hampton, the future Mrs Halsted. Another of Halsted’s contributions was the development of topical anesthesia using cocaine. As a consequence of these experiments he developed addiction to the drug and later on morphia.²

One of the most important aspects of the Halsted School of surgery was the training of residents to be not only surgeons but also teachers of surgery. Seven of his seventeen residents became professors of surgery at



William Steward Halsted (1852-1922)

Harvard, Yale, and Stanford, and another six went to other positions at medical schools or teaching hospitals. Eleven of Halsted’s residents set up residency training programs in their new posts. Halsted selected four residents to organize the surgical subdivisions of orthopedics, otolaryngology, roentgenology, and urology. His residents fondly referred to him as “*The Professor*”.

Lately he was bald, wore a moustache, and a little tuft of gray hair on his lower lip. During his Hopkins days in Baltimore (1886-1922) he was reclusive, and little is known of his personal life. He was married but had no children. He loved his dogs, enjoyed dahlia raising and astronomy. Coddled guinea hen egg was his favorite breakfast. He sent his laundry once a year to Paris. Several biographies written by Halsted’s contemporaries constitute the bulk of what is known about Halsted’s personal life. Late in Halsted’s life, he developed a warm and affectionate relationship with a young lady 40 years his junior. Halsted’s warm,

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personal, and playful letters are in stark contrast to his biographers' portrayals of him as a more serious person.³

Lost in this hagiographic haze are certain true aspects of his upbringing, family life, and professional activities. Newly available information shows that Halsted's father, William Mills Halsted, Jr, was involved in numerous financial irregularities.⁴

Dr. William Stewart Halsted passed away on September 7, 1922 but without question, he left an indelible mark on an entire generation of surgeons and on the practice of surgery itself.

REFERENCES

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Forthcoming Events

EVENT DATE, VENUE CONTACT	22nd World Congress of Endourology and SWL <i>November 3rd – 6th, 2004, Mumbai, India.</i> Dr. Mahesh Desai, Chairman, Dept. of Urology, Muljibhai Patel Urological Hospital, Nadiad - 387 001, Gujarat, India. Tel: +91-268-2520323 to 2520330, Fax: +91-268-2520248/2520331, E-mail: mrdesai@wce2004.com , mrdesai@mpuh.org , Website: www.wce2004.com
EVENT DATE, VENUE CONTACT	14th Biennial Conference Asian Pacific Association For Study of The Liver (APASL) with 13th Annual Conference of Indian Association for The Study of The Liver <i>December 11th – 15th, 2004, New Delhi, India.</i> Dr S. K. Sarin, President APASL. E-mail: welcomer@apaslindia2004.com , Website: www.apaslindia2004.com
EVENT DATE, VENUE CONTACT	The 64th Annual Conference of the Association of Surgeons of India <i>December 26th to 30th, 2004</i> Dr Mohan Gupta, Organising Secretary, ASICON 2004 Aarogya Hospital, Twin City Market, 5-4-183 to 199, Moazam Jahi Market. Hyderabad - 500001, India. Tel: 0091-40-30903994, 55624687, Tele/Fax:0091-40-24744223, E-mail: asicon_2004@yahoo.com / asicon20004@rediffmail.com
EVENT DATE, VENUE CONTACT	ENDOSURGERY'05 <i>February 24th / 25th / 26th, 2005, Ayushman, New Delhi</i> Dr. Pradeep Chowbey, Organizing Chairman, Ayushman, Double Storey Market, R-Block, New Rajinder Nagar, New Delhi - 110 060, India. Tel.: +91-11-25821768 / 25748085 / 28741188 / 28742929. Fax.: +91-11-26519935/25748085. E-mail: info@endosurgery05.com / chowbey1@vsnl.com
EVENT DATE, VENUE CONTACT	IAGES Mid Term Conference Laparo Link : 2005 <i>January 28th - 30th, 2005, Coonoor: Nilgiris, Tamilnadu</i> Dr. V. Venkatesh, Organizing Chairman IAGES Mid Term Conference, Indian Institute of Laparoscopic Surgery, Research and Training Centre, V.G. Hospital, Mettupalayam Road, Coimbatore - 641 034, Tamil Nadu, India. Tel: 2642772, 2642071. Mobile: 98430 64045. E-mail: vghospital@eth.net