

Royal College of Physicians – Lives of the Fellows

George Durant Kersley

b.27 December 1906 d.1 September 1993

OBE TD MRCS LRCP(1931) MA MB BChir Cantab(1931) MRCP(1933) MEXI(1934) FRCP(1943) Hon DSc Bath(1971)

George Kersley's life and work were devoted to rheumatology, to his native city Bath, and in particular to the hospital with which he came to be identified: the Royal National Hospital for Rheumatic Diseases, previously known as the Mineral Water Hospital.

His father, Henry George Kersley, was a respected member of a well known Bath family and a J P. His mother was Edith née Durant. After attending Malvern School, George studied medicine at Caius College, Cambridge, and St Bartholomew's Hospital, London. He was an outstanding student, gaining his membership of the College in 1933 and winning the Horton Smith prize at Cambridge for his MD thesis. He married Mary Yeomans, a Bart's nurse, that same year. After qualification he held junior appointments at Bart's under Sir Francis Fraser [Munk's Roll, Vol.V, p.141] and Lord Horder [Munk's Roll, Vol.V, p.198].

In 1934 he took an unexpected step and accepted an invitation to join James Lindsay in Bath, in spite of Sir Francis Fraser's comment that he was 'prostituting his soul' professionally by moving into the backwaters of spa medicine. In the following year he was appointed to the staff of the Royal United Hospital and the Mineral Water Hospital. The conditions for the 140 patients at the latter hospital were far from satisfactory and funds were raised for the building of a bigger and better hospital on an inner city site, with Spa water piped in for hydrotherapy. HM The Queen was to lay the foundation stone in September 1939 but the ceremony was cancelled on the outbreak of war and this particular plan was never realized.

George joined the RAMC and served as a medical specialist in the 4th Southern General Hospital. In 1941 he set up the Army's first school of occupational therapy in Taunton. In the following year, as a lieutenant colonel, he was appointed adviser in physical medicine and rehabilitation in the Middle East. Later he set up the 19th Southern General (TA) Hospital, continuing for many years thereafter as its honorary colonel. He also organized the annual Bath Tattoo, in recognition of which he was awarded the OBE. After the war he relinquished his post in general medicine in order to concentrate on rheumatology, taking up appointments in Bristol at the Royal Infirmary and Southmead Hospitals, and a clinical lectureship in Bristol University medical school.

George was keenly aware of the need for rheumatology to develop as a specialty in its own right and not be seen as a mere adjunct to physical medicine. It meant raising the standards of clinical practice and promoting research in rheumatic diseases, both of which he achieved. In 1946 with the support of a generous benefactor, Sidney Robinson, he founded the first research unit in Bath to investigate the pathology, immunology and clinical aspects of rheumatic diseases. The unit worked under considerable difficulties, the hospital having been badly damaged in the 'Baedeker raids' on Bath in 1942 and patched up with makeshift repairs. A greater threat to the hospital then arose. Following the introduction of the NHS in 1948 there were powerful pressures for the closure of the damaged hospital; it being claimed that the care of rheumatic patients would be better carried out in two or three designated wards in a general hospital.

George Kersley's greatest achievement was in the campaign that he waged over the next 10 years, almost single-handed and with passionate energy. He opposed the regional board, ministers of health and professors of medicine, mobilized public opinion locally and nationally, and petitioned and addressed a committee of the House of Lords: the funds raised for the abortive building of the hospital in 1939 were not to be 'lost' in an anonymous NHS exchequer but used for the purpose the donors had intended. His campaign succeeded and approval was given for the rebuilding of the hospital where it stood, with its historic form and façade preserved. He was the driving force in its planning and when it was reopened in 1965 it had become a modern hospital, capable of providing

first class care for its patients. It also became a nationally recognized centre for teaching and research and strong links were established with the University of Bath, which awarded him an honorary DSc

He was a founder member of the Empire Rheumatism Council -which later became the Arthritis & Rheumatism Council, president of the European League against Rheumatism, 1969-71, and president of the Heberden Society in 1962. Many still remember that year for its annual dinner which George arranged in the House of Commons. His textbook *The rheumatic diseases ...* 2nd ed, London, W Heinemann, 1945, went into four editions. He published a number of papers on rheumatic diseases and on Bath and its waters. In 1959 he gave a notable first description of the condition later named polymyalgia rheumatica. His last publication, co-authored with John Glyn, was *A concise international history of rheumatology and rehabilitation*, London, RSM Services Ltd, 1991.

George was always an active and energetic man, of handsome appearance and elegant style. He lived in The Circus, as leading Bath doctors traditionally did. In prewar years he enjoyed horse riding and sailing at Dartmouth, and started a fine collection of antique glass. He also served in the Territorial Army as a captain. By his first marriage he had a daughter and a son, Jonathan, who is an ophthalmic surgeon. After the marriage was dissolved in 1948 he married Lilian May (Micky) Vernon, with whom he had a daughter and acquired a stepson.

After retirement in 1975 he turned to politics and was elected a Conservative councillor for the City of Bath, becoming Mayor in 1979. It was a matter of great regret to him that he was unable to bring about the reopening of the Spa. As a colleague he was invariably cooperative and supportive, always eager to help any person or project for the benefit of the hospital. The hospital itself and its fine reputation are his best memorial.

J Cosh

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