



Robert Bews Kerr

Dr. Robert Bews Kerr chuckles when asked why he chose medicine as a profession — a profession to which he subsequently gave sterling service by being the first head of the department of medicine at the University of British Columbia. “It’s something I always wanted to do”, he explains, “even though our family doctor once sat me down when I was about 12 and said, ‘Don’t be a doctor — medicine is going to be socialized very soon.’”

Born in Hamilton, Ont., in 1908, Robert Kerr studied at Hamilton Central Collegiate Institute, and then went to the University of Toronto for a BA in biological and medical sciences in 1930, an MD in 1933 and an MA in physiology in 1936. By the time he entered his internship at Toronto General Hospital in 1933 he was already attracted to internal medicine, and in 1935 he became a fellow in the department of physiology, working with Professor Charles Best on protamine zinc insulin. He went to England for 2 years of postgraduate study; as a research fellow attached to University College Hospital, London, he worked alongside Sir Harold Himsworth (who later became secretary of the British Medical Research

Council) on diabetes mellitus.

During the war Dr. Kerr spent 4 years in Europe. He was made an Officer of the Order of the British Empire for his services; his citation particularly noted that he had cared for 430 diphtheria cases in Belgium, and had managed to save all but one life.

At the end of the war he was asked to look after 650 concentration-camp victims, all of whom were painfully emaciated and most of whom were seriously ill. He remembers in particular making his rounds one day, and being summoned by a whisper from one patient. “He was a physician who had been on the faculty of Montpellier University. I had prescribed penicillin for him and he wanted to know what this new drug was and how it was produced. In my broken French I explained that it came from the green stuff on bread.” Dr. Kerr’s war time colleagues recall their lieutenant-colonel with affection: “His pleasing personality and outstanding devotion to duty”, reads his citation, “have been an example and an inspiration to all with whom he has come in contact.”

In 1945 Dr. Kerr returned to the University of Toronto department of medicine, and was head of the department of therapeutics from 1947 to 1950. Then, in 1950, he was offered a great challenge: to develop from scratch a completely new department of medicine at the University of British Columbia. The first class of 60 students was enrolled in September 1950. Dr. Kerr spent “a most interesting 24 years” creating an atmosphere and teaching program in which students got a thorough grounding in clinical medicine at Vancouver General Hospital, St. Paul’s Hospital and Shaughnessy Hospital. When he retired from this position in 1974, he became a professor emeritus.

During his career Dr. Kerr has always been active in professional organizations. He served on the council of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons 1961–70. During his term as president between 1966 and 1968 the College expanded the number of specialties

in the division of medicine, began to publish its *Annals*, and developed the McLaughlin Examination and Research Centre in Edmonton.

Dr. Kerr also served on the Medical Council of Canada 1951–72 and, as chairman of the qualification committee from 1965 to 1967 and later as president in 1968, he helped the Council to develop a new examination system to cope with the influx of physicians wanting Council qualifications.

Between 1951 and 1974 Dr. Kerr was on the medical advisory committee of the British Columbia Tuberculosis Association. He also sat on the research grants committee of the Canadian Tuberculosis and Respiratory Disease Association.

Since his retirement in 1974 Dr. Kerr has become a historian of the profession. His history of the Medical Council of Canada was published by the Council in 1979. He is currently writing the biographies of Professors Duncan Graham and Ray Farquharson, who were the first two Sir John and Lady Eaton Professors of Medicine at the University of Toronto.

In 1937 Dr. Kerr married Lois Reynolds, then a journalist with the *Globe and Mail* and a member of an innovative studio group of playwrights in Toronto, and recently the author of a guidebook for Alaska cruises. One of the Kerrs’ most exciting years was in 1959, when Dr. Kerr was the Sir Arthur Sims Travelling Professor and they visited medical schools and hospitals in what was then British Africa — South Africa, Rhodesia, Nyasaland, Nigeria, Ghana, Uganda, Kenya and Malta. The Kerrs have three sons; the youngest, Charles Robert Kerr, is assistant professor in UBC’s department of medicine.

In 1967 Dr. Kerr was awarded the Centennial Medal; 10 years later he was given the Silver Jubilee Medal. Today, he still sees a few patients and divides the rest of his time between writing, swimming, gardening, and his family, including eight grandchildren. ■

Charlotte Gray