



Dr Henry Shimizu: The Journey of a Canadian Plastic Surgeon, Advocate, and Artist

Docteur Henry Shimizu : l'aventure d'un plasticien, militant et artiste canadien

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Yaesh Sardiwalla, BSc¹ and Steven F. Morris, MD, MSc^{1,2}

Abstract

Dr Henry Shimizu was a dedicated Canadian plastic surgeon with Japanese roots who spent his career practicing in Edmonton at the University of Alberta Hospital. He relished the opportunity to share his expertise by training residents and medical students. Dr Shimizu completed his plastic surgery training in the United States and was central to establishing the plastic surgery training program in Edmonton. Beyond clinical practice, Dr Shimizu was a prominent advocate in his community, serving as the Chairman of the Redress committee for Japanese internment. As a talented painter, he had produced magnificent oil paintings based on childhood recollections as an internee in the Slocan Valley. Dr Shimizu has made significant contributions to Canadian plastic surgery serving as president of the Canadian Society of Plastic Surgeons in 1978. His clinic work and dedication to the community at large were recognized with the Order of Canada in 2004 and more recently an honorary degree from the University of Victoria. Dr Shimizu continues to golf, paint, and travel in his retirement. He is happily married to his wife Joan and is the proud father of 4 children and 6 grandchildren.

Résumé

Le docteur Henry Shimizu, un plasticien canadien dévoué d'origine japonaise, a exercé pendant toute sa carrière à l'University of Alberta Hospital d'Edmonton. Il adorait partager ses compétences par l'enseignement aux résidents et aux étudiants en médecine. Il a terminé sa formation en chirurgie plastique aux États-Unis et a joué un rôle essentiel dans la création du programme de chirurgie plastique à Edmonton. Au-delà de la pratique clinique, le docteur Shimizu était un militant réputé dans sa communauté : il a présidé le comité de redressement pour l'internement des Japonais. Peintre talentueux, il a produit de magnifiques peintures à l'huile sur ses souvenirs d'enfance alors qu'il était interné dans la vallée de Slocan. Le docteur Shimizu a contribué largement à la chirurgie plastique au Canada et a présidé la Société canadienne des chirurgiens plasticiens en 1978. Il a été nommé membre de l'Ordre du Canada en 2004 pour son travail clinique et son dévouement envers l'ensemble de la communauté, et plus récemment, a reçu un doctorat honorifique de l'université de Victoria. Maintenant à la retraite, le docteur Shimizu continue de jouer au golf, de peindre et de voyager. Il vit un mariage heureux avec sa femme, Joan, et est le fier père de quatre enfants et de six petits-enfants.

Keywords

history, surgery, plastic, microsurgery, art, Medical Education

From Humble Beginnings

Dr Henry Shimizu (Figure 1) was born in Prince Rupert, British Columbia, in 1928. His father, Shotaro Shimizu, known as Tom, came to Canada from Japan in 1905 to work on the railway. Tom and his business partner George Nishikaze owned the New Dominion Hotel in Prince Rupert. Long before becoming a renowned plastic surgeon, young Henry could be found folding napkins at the family restaurant.

On December 7, 1941, the Japanese launched their attack on Pearl Harbour. The attack heralded the beginning of Canadian

involvement in the War and marked a time of great change for the Shimizu household. All people of Japanese ancestry including naturalized Canadian Citizens were told that they would

¹ Faculty of Medicine, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Canada

² Division of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Canada

Corresponding Author:

Yaesh Sardiwalla, Faculty of Medicine, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Canada.
Email: yaesh@dal.ca



Figure 1. Dr Henry Shimizu at the University of Alberta Hospital.



Figure 2. Families and Friends Saying Their Goodbyses as the Train Departed the CN Railway Station is Prince Rupert Destined for Hastings Park.

have to leave the West Coast following the “Order in Council.” During this process, families lost their businesses, property, and all possessions aside from 50 pounds of personal items they were permitted to carry.¹ On March 23, 1942, Dr Shimizu, his mother, and 3 siblings, along with 600 other Japanese workers, were taken by truck with their luggage to the CN Railway station in Prince Rupert (Figure 2).

Images of Internment

The Shimizu’s were first relocated to Hastings Park, a fenced area where they stayed for several months.¹ In the fall of 1942, the family was moved to the New Denver internment camp in the Slokan Valley. The internees in New Denver

maintained a 100-bed hospital to treat patients with chronic conditions. Tom worked as a part-time chef at the hospital, while Henry and his sister worked shifts as elevator operators there.² Henry remembers games of hockey and baseball that punctuated long days of work and study. Being interned in New Denver involved many hardships but also provided beautiful scenery that established hope.

Dr Shimizu began grade 9 at Notre Dame des Anges, a high school that was established by the sisters of the Catholic Church to educate the internees. Nuns from prominent families provided an excellent general education. The school’s reputation for quality education attracted 2 Caucasian students to enroll rather than joining the traditional “white school.” The education provided proved essential to Dr. Shimizu’s future success in medicine.

For a complete recollection of Dr. Shimizu’s background, please view Supplemental Video 1 (14 minutes)—Shimizu Background

The Journey to Plastic Surgery

After the War, Dr Shimizu’s parents decided the family would move to Edmonton. The University of Alberta provided accessible education to all students, including those of Japanese ancestry. Dr Shimizu was accepted to pre-med and subsequently medical school at the University of Alberta, from which he graduated from in 1954.³ He completed a general surgery residency at University of Alberta Hospital in 1960. The Chief of Surgery, Dr Walter C MacKenzie, who later became Dean arranged for Dr Shimizu to have plastic surgery training interviews in New York, Pittsburgh, and Duke with the agreement that he would return to Edmonton. Dr Shimizu was recruited by University of Pittsburgh to join his mentor Dr Willie White, a respected hand surgeon whose practice included cosmetic surgery and burn care.

Dr “Mac” Alton was 4 years senior to Dr Shimizu in medical school. Dr Alton had already started a plastic surgery practice in Edmonton when Dr Shimizu returned from Pittsburgh in 1962. Together, Dr Alton and Dr Shimizu had complementary skillsets and started the Division of Plastic Surgery at the University of Alberta. The program has become renowned for incredible advancements in burn care through Drs Alton and Tredget’s leadership in the Firefighters Burn Treatment Unit. For most of his career, Dr Shimizu operated on hands, closed cleft palates, healed burns, and even reattached severed limbs.²

To hear more about the regional development of plastic surgery in Edmonton (9 minutes) – Supplemental Video 2 - Shimizu Edmonton

“Daddy Cut Off My Arm!”

On July 15, 1974, Dr Shimizu was working with Dr Gary Lobay who had just started as a staff surgeon that very day. Dr Lobay had returned from 6 months of fellowships including 1 month of training in microsurgery techniques with Dr Harry Buncke in San Francisco. During lunch after a busy morning,



Figure 3. Images from the first upper limb replant performed in Canada by Drs Shimizu and Lobay.

Dr Lobay put his hand in his pocket and took out 6 microsurgery sutures that Dr Buncke had given him. These were the first sutures of this type in Canada. Dr Lobay thought they may come in use at some point but didn't know when.

That afternoon, Dr Shimizu received a somewhat panicked phone call from an emergency doctor in Rimbey informing him that a young girl had suffered an upper limb amputation after she was run over by a hay mower whilst napping in a field. Dr Shimizu advised the doctor to put the severed hand into a double plastic bag with ice and arranged for immediate transfer. The University Hospitals ORs were closed that day. Dr Shimizu called the Charles Camsell Hospital requesting an Operating Room and anesthesiologist. Dr Peter Campanero who was found in the parking lot agreed to participate in the replant. The operating room nurse happened to be familiar with microsurgery instrumentation, since she trained in Melbourne where she worked with the famous microsurgeon Mr. Bernard O'Brien.

The young girl arrived at the emergency department:

Dr Shimizu asked: "What happened?"

She replied in a small but steady voice: "Oh, my daddy cut my arm off."

Dr Shimizu asked: "Where is it?"

She pointed with her right hand to a plastic bucket that held the severed limb, wrapped in plastic to protect the skin from ice water.

Dr Shimizu noted to Dr Lobay: "Just like it was cut with a knife!"

The operation (Figure 3) started at 6 PM, 4 hours after the accident had happened. The orthopedic surgeon, Dr Peter Boucher, amputated about an inch of the humerus and put in K-wires within 15 minutes. Drs Lobay and Shimizu marked the appropriate tendons, nerves, and blood vessels for replantation. They had the artery anastomosed within an hour. The vein was more time consuming, taking 5 hours to complete the final

vessel anastomosis. At midnight, they released the clamps and the arm went pink instantly. A feeling of victory and achievement lifted the operating room. The surgery represented the first microsurgical replant of an arm in Canada. The young girl could open her hand impressively over a 20-year follow-up. Dr Shimizu labels many events that day as serendipitous, but the operation would not have been successful without the team's dedication.

Dr. Shimizu recounts the events of the replant (13 minutes) – Supplemental Video 3 - Shimizu Replant

Artist and Healer

Dr Willie White in Pittsburgh emphasized the importance creating art for a surgeon, obligating his residents to attend courses at the Carnegie Institute. Dr Shimizu visited the Japanese-American Museum of Art that exhibited many paintings done by Japanese-American internees. Most of them were dreary paintings. It prompted him to create 27 oil-paintings based on the striking memories of his youth in the Slocan Valley, portray the happier aspects of his bittersweet experiences. These paintings have been exhibited all around Canada and are presented with a narrative in a book titled "Images of Internment: A Bitter-Sweet Memoir in Words and Images."

Dr Shimizu was a staunch advocate in the pursuit of redress for past injustices faced by Japanese-Canadians. In 1988, Prime Minister Brian Mulroney apologized for the government's actions. In addition, individuals were compensated, and funds were put into a foundation to repair Japanese-Canadian relationships. Dr Shimizu was the Chairman of the Redress Foundation that conducted over 150 projects and programs in the community.

Dr Shimizu is a well-respected retired Canadian plastic surgeon and has been a prominent member of the Canadian

Society of Plastic Surgery. He spent time as the secretary of the society and subsequently became president in 1978.³ For his accomplishments in medicine, his artistic work and dedication to his community, he was awarded the Order of Canada in 2004. Dr Shimizu has received recognition from the University of Alberta as a distinguished alumnus and in 2012 received an honorary degree from the University of Victoria.⁴ Dr Shimizu continues to golf, paint, and travel in his retirement. He is happily married to his wife Joan and is the proud father of 4 children and 6 grandchildren.

Dr. Shimizu describes his passion for art, his legacy and awards (12 minutes) – Supplemental Video 4 - Shimizu Art and Legacy

Authors' Note

Y.S. is a third-year medical student at Dalhousie University. S.F.M. is a staff physician at the Queen Elizabeth II Health Science Center and Professor of Surgery at Dalhousie University.

Y.S. prepared the manuscript, conducted the interviews, and completed background research. S.F.M. organized the interviews, provided background information, contributed to the manuscript and is the Historian of the Canadian Society of Plastic Surgeons.

The information presented in this article is primarily based on a personal interview with Dr. Henry Shimizu. The interview is part of the larger history project currently being conducted by the Canadian Society of Plastic Surgeons. Information was corroborated by other sources including Dr. Gary Lobay to ensure the accuracy of the article. To see the full text transcription of the video interview please see supplemental material located online.

The content expressed in the submitted article are the authors original content based of interviews that were video recorded to ensure accuracy of information presented. Permission from individuals featured in this publication were obtained. No patient data or identifying patient information is reported

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