

In Memoriam

In Celebration of a Life Well Lived: Dr. James Preston Robb April 4, 1914–September 25, 2004

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Preston Robb was Professor of Neurology and Neurologist-in-Chief at the Montreal Neurological Hospital from 1968 to 1976. He was a past president of the American Epilepsy Society, one of the founders of the American Academy of Neurology, and a pioneer of Paediatric Neurology in Quebec. Dr. Robb was born in Montreal in 1914, the son of Joseph Doig Robb and Janie McLeod Preston. He took pride in his trace of Indian blood. One of his ancestors was Thayendanegea (Joseph Brant), the Mohawk chief who commanded the Iroquois forces allied with the British in the American Revolutionary War. The influence of Robb's parents lasted a lifetime; throughout his career, his father's photograph always graced his office.

He studied medicine at McGill, graduating in 1939. While at the university, he played in the Canadian intercollegiate football championship, and this accounted for his distinguishing broken nose. The team skills he learned in the Molson stadium stood him in good stead later on, perhaps contributing to his outstanding abilities as a captain of the rehabilitation group he created at the Montreal Children's Hospital and as a leader of neurology at McGill. After interning at the Montreal General Hospital and the Verdun Protestant, he joined the Royal Canadian Navy, serving overseas and then at a base in Montreal. In response to Dr. Penfield's urgent request, he was remanded to the Montreal Neurological Hospital. This experience sealed his fate, propelling him into a career in neurology and prompting him to return there at the end of the War. An extended tour of American pediatric neurological centers took him to Johns Hopkins, where he spent some time with Frank Ford, whose clinical skills he greatly admired, and to Boston, where he worked with Richmond Paine and Randolph Byers. On his return to Montreal, he set to work at the Montreal Children's Hospital and the Montreal Neurological Institute. At the Children's, he succeeded Francis McNaughton, who was to become McGill's first Professor of Neurology. He was, for generations of trainees from all over the world, a role model of rectitude and fairness.



As well, he was a magnificent teacher, always nurturing independent thought and supporting initiative.

He was punctual, decisive, and his clinical judgement was phenomenal. Like many great pediatric neurologists, he obtained most of his information by watching children at play and interacting with their games. He was extraordinarily fond of children, and they responded in kind, undaunted by his imposing stern exterior, known to intimidate cocky residents and obstreperous sailors alike.

Cerebral palsy was a common problem during the years Robb was in practice. Accordingly, he developed a cerebral palsy conference staffed by a formidable team of occupational therapists, physiotherapists, speech therapists, orthopedic surgeons, social workers, psychiatrists, special education teachers, and psychologists. Robb was a magnet. He attracted the finest members of these professions to his group, and they formed a dynamic, loyal team around their captain. The cerebral palsy conference at the Montreal Children's Hospital served for many years as a model for centers across Canada.

Robb's research started with work in language localization with Wilder Penfield, whom he held in high regard, and he wrote about neurologic complications of pregnancy, motor disability, and various pediatric neurologic problems. Above all, he pursued a life-long interest in epilepsy. In 1964 he followed the call of his friend, Richard Masland, to the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in Bethesda, Maryland. After a stint there, he traveled extensively, surveying facilities for the treatment of epilepsy across the United States and Canada. These travels culminated in a volume on the epidemiology of epilepsy entitled *Epilepsy: A Review of Basic and Clinical Research*. He pioneered the cooperative epilepsy studies launched by the NIH. His work set the stage for the centers of excellence for treatment of epilepsy created across the United States. Robb was greatly concerned about the creation in underdeveloped countries of treatment facilities for epilepsy and other neurologic disorders. He trained many neurologists from Africa, Asia, and South America, and toward the end of his career, served as visiting professor at the University of Nairobi. His exposure to the hurdles that must be overcome before epilepsy can be effectively treated in Third World countries left an indelible impression. On his return to Canada, he wrote a practical text on the subject for paramedics and other health workers. It has since been translated into Chinese, Spanish, and Portuguese. His papers were a model of style and always to the point.

Robb was a founder and president of the Canadian Neurological Society. He received the William Lennox Award of the American Epilepsy Society and became chairman

and medical advisor to many organizations, including the Presidential Advisory Board of the Epilepsy Foundation of America, The U.S. Public Health Service Advisory Committee on the Epilepsies, and many local centers.

Robb was an example to his juniors in many ways, none more so than in his family life. His marriage to Mary Waller was a particularly happy one. She had been a head nurse at the Montreal General Hospital. Beautiful, kind, warm, and endowed with faultless social judgment, she eased her husband's heavy workload and helped generations of foreign neurological trainees and their families adapt to North American ways. They had four children, molded by their happy home life. Although Robb never seemed quite certain about the role of women in medicine, the eventual addition to the family of a physician daughter-in-law seemed to tilt the scales in a favorable direction. Sociable and friendly, a droll raconteur, Robb was a wonderful host.

In 1982, Robb was made Professor Emeritus of Neurology at McGill. He had always said that he did not want to be under foot when he retired as Neurologist-in-Chief. True to his word, on retirement, he moved to Lyn, Ontario, where he embarked on a second, highly successful, career as Chairman of the Board of the family company and at last had time to enjoy his hobbies of tree farming and wood carving.

During the long and satisfying years of our collaboration, I came to appreciate deeply two attitudes that set Preston Robb apart. The first was his desire to understand the cultural and emotional background of his patients, often so different from his own. This, he sensed, determined their reaction to neurologic disability in themselves and in their loved ones. The second was his insistence that the physician do everything possible to create an environment in which patients and families were able to maintain their dignity while coping with the dreadful hurdles that life placed in their path.

Preston Robb died at the age of 90 years after a brief illness. He was in full possession of his faculties to the end and gave a remarkable address after receiving a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Montreal Neurological Institute, just a week earlier.