HENRY SAMUEL SHUCKSMITH

Virtue is like a rich stone – best plain set

In a medical school such as ours, set in the industrial North, the majority of recruits were, in days gone by, the sons and daughters of the professions and business. Henry was different in being the son of a Lincolnshire farmer and has, consciously and unconsciously remained different, particularly because he is so often devastatingly down to earth.

Educated in that farming community, he no doubt gained academic distinctions in school, but these are not recorded, for he must have regarded them, correctly, not as foundation stones but as very minor links in his career tapestry.

He entered Leeds University in 1927 and at the end of the pre-clinical course was awarded the Infirmary Scholarship as well as the Littlewood prize in Anatomy. Prior to taking advantage of the scholarship, he was inspired by the late Professor B A McSwiney to step aside from his fellows for a year, at the end of which he was awarded first class honours in the Bachelor of Science degree in physiology. This was the solid foundation stone on which his subsequent work was erected.

It must have been about this time that he acquired an almost unique ability to choose for his instructors the excellent, as apart from the moderate. He has been able to discard unnecessary information in order to concentrate on the invaluable. Among the mentors he particularly admired were the late Professor E R Flint, J Kay Jamieson, B A McSwiney and P R Allison. Purposefully, but not necessarily wisely, he ignored normal extra-curricular activities during his student days. This devotion to work meant that, almost inevitably, he was awarded first class honours in his qualifying examinations and almost swept the board in gaining the Edward Ward prize for surgical anatomy, the McGill prize for clinical surgery, the Hardwick prize for clinical medicine and the William Hey gold medal. Two of these prizes he shared with A B Raper.

After qualification, he attached himself to the late Professor E R Flint as house surgeon. From him, no doubt, he first learned that speed in operating is not synonymous with hurry and that good surgical technique means maximum return for minimal effort with minimal trauma. From Flint, too, he probably acquired some of the taciturn element in his character. It is related that one day he met his chief at the hospital front entrance, did a conscientious ward round and finally parted at the front door. Apart from quiet grunts, the total utterance from Flint was 'Nasty muggy day, Shucksmith'. Such was the clinical understanding and natural rapport between them. Following orthopaedic experience, he proceeded to appointments as senior casualty officer, resident surgical officer and surgical tutor. Having taken the Primary examination of the Royal College of Surgeons during his student days, he proceeded to the Final examination in the year following his final university degree. He had also signalled his precocious academic brilliance by having his first of many contributions to medical literature published during this year. It was during this time that he was wont to carry some suture material in his left-hand pocket so that he could practise tying reef knots with one hand. He also spent hours in the post-mortem department practising the various techniques of intestinal anastomosis.

He had joined the Territorial Army in 1938 and was mobilized at the outbreak of war into the 4th (1st Northern) General Hospital. This 2,000-bedded hospital later became based in Étaples and it was here that his organizing abilities manifested themselves. His ideas were not always in accord with those of his seniors but he was usually right. When the hospital was transferred to Malta under dangerous and difficult circumstances, the necessity of a

hobby, foresight of possible famine conditions, and his farming background, persuaded him to organize a small pig farm on land not far from the hospital. This was to prove useful later. From Malta, he was posted to Sicily and later Italy in charge of a casualty clearing station. Here he gained enormous experience. Many of the casualties were transferred to the base hospital in Malta for definitive treatment and convalescence. Many of them so transferred had a pig drawn on their plaster of Paris encasements. This was perhaps the way a superficially unemotional man demonstrated his loyalty, affection and nostalgia for the staff of his base unit.

It was during this time that he had enormous experience of abdominal injuries in battle casualties, on which he was later to give his address as Hunterian Professor to the Royal College of Surgeons. Many who were familiar with his work beyond the front line felt that it deserved significant recognition. The fact that it did not may illustrate his unwillingness to show respect merely because of seniority in rank.

After further service in Belgium, he was released early from the Army in order to return to his duties as surgical tutor. In his application for the post of honorary assistant surgeon in 1946, he stated that one of his particular interests was in peripheral vascular disease. His original stimulus probably lay in the hands of the late Professor B A McSwiney, who was an authority on smooth muscle. This led to a theoretical interest in the autonomic nervous system, which became an applied interest during his term with the late E R Flint. He always maintained a physiological and surgical interest in this system. His desire to get down to the bottom of the mine of information has remained unabated. When he was appointed to the honorary consultant staff of the General Infirmary at Leeds, sympathectomy was in vogue for the treatment of hypertension. These lumbar and cervical sympathectomies involved much of his time until they were superseded by drug therapy. Thence he devoted his time and interests more and more to the practice of major peripheral vascular surgery and he pioneered this in the Infirmary in 1955, following a second visit to the United States. Recently, it must have given him quiet satisfaction, not to say added confidence, when he had to undergo such surgery himself, that two of his former trainee assistants were to do the operation. It is related that the only pre-operative advice he gave to them was to go to bed early.

One of his other interests has concerned tumours of the breast. Prior to 1955, a considerable amount of work had been undertaken in the Leeds University Department of Experimental Pathology and Cancer Research concerning the relationship and behaviour between hormones and mammary cancer in the mouse. It seemed important to make an attempt to relate the experimental findings to the disease as it occurred in the human and Shucksmith was invited to collaborate. A weekly clinic was established in the Infirmary attended by Shucksmith, two pathologists, a chemist and a radiotherapist. This combined clinic still exists. From it has emerged the strong view that many patients with cancer of the breast need not be treated by the mutilating operations which were previously practised. It has become clear from the literature that many people have been thinking along these lines and less radical procedures are being tried elsewhere.

Although these have been his principal interests, it would be wrong to regard him as anything but a general surgeon with a discriminating sense of the importance of physiology and anatomy as a background for surgical intervention. His work on the parotid gland exemplifies this, as well as his significant contribution to the treatment of subclavian aneurysm caused by cervical rib. His contributions to medical literature have been many, thoughtful and honest.

In teaching and training others, he always set a very high standard: in so doing at times, he may have seemed impatient, but it is true that his sometimes-cruel criticism of others was almost matched by his own self-criticism. In dealing with others, he always insisted on attention to detail, complete honesty and punctuality. This reflected itself in the well-being and confidence of his patients. He makes a fetish of his own punctuality. He would support and take an active interest in furthering the chosen career of those of his juniors who adhered to these principles. He gave lots of encouragement to juniors and would demonstrate his technique with the words: 'I'll show you once. If it's difficult, I'll show you twice. If you can't do it then, you'll be no damn good.' Nevertheless, he had the all too uncommonly demonstrated patience to stand at the assistant's side of the table whilst his junior operated.

For those who got to know this extraordinary man, wit, teacher and surgeon, his ideal of intellectual honesty above everything else is well worth remembering. As an example of the quick wit of a sometimes-impatient man, the story of the visit of an Archbishop of York to a sister hospital can be quoted. Shucksmith was delayed in parking his car by the manoeuvrings of the Archbishop's large car. After a moment of thought, Henry remarked to his companion, 'Someone should remind the old boy that a donkey was good enough for his boss'. It is often said by one generation in an establishment like ours that the present does not produce the 'characters' of the past. Shucksmith belies this. He proposes to employ his over-energetic mind in his retirement years immersed in a course of law in the Open University.

We wish him and his wife all that is good.

T McM Boyle

Source: Leeds Reunion, November 1975