

AGENDA ITEM 1.8 OBITUARY

MR WILLIAM WYBROW HALLWRIGHT GENERAL SURGEON 3 JANUARY 1918 – 27 MAY 2021

Bill Hallwright was an extraordinary Fellow of the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons. Not only did he practice until aged 82 and live 103 years, but he epitomised all the qualities of the complete surgeon. An educator ahead of both his time and the literature, equipped with outstanding technical skills, Bill taught that compassionate care delivered better outcomes for patients and families. He held the utmost respect for people, regardless of race, religion, culture and gender - he simply wanted others to be the best they could be. Anne Kolbe, the first female President of the College, recalls with gratitude how Bill (and Tony Hunter with whom she worked at the time) were instrumental in re-instating her selection as a surgical trainee after this had been revoked some time after being announced. This accorded with Bill's positive attitude, kindness and compassion and his strong belief that doctors should always try to 'walk in the patient's shoes'.

William (Bill) Hallwright was born in Wairoa, to Guy Hallwright, Surgeon-Superintendent at Wairoa District Hospital, and Ethel May Hallwright (nee Piermont), a nurse. He was the second of three boys, with older brother, Matthew, and younger, Guy (known as Pont). Growing up in the small town of Wairoa, they lived in a house by the Wairoa River and enjoyed considerable freedom in making their own entertainment. With his brothers, Bill became a boarder at Huntly Preparatory School in Marton. There he excelled as an athlete holding school records in the 220 and 440 yards and the long distance. Next a boarder at Wanganui Collegiate, Bill played in the 1st XI and won the Shooting Cup at 16 years when still too young to shoot legally. He was academically even more capable, completing his Matriculation examination and achieving eligibility for university entrance at the age of 14 years. A school report card from 1932 reveals A passes in all 10 subjects and the comment by the principal - "Uncommonly Bright Prospects".

Obviously gifted and able to follow any path he wished, Bill, early in life, was booked to be sent to the Royal Academy at Dartmouth to enter the Royal Navy. When asked by his father at age 12 years if he really wanted to go, he said he would rather do medicine, following his father and uncle who were doctors and his mother who was a nurse. Bill commenced at Otago University in 1935, residing at Selwyn College for five years. Reflecting the constraints of the Depression, his father gave him an allowance of ten shillings a month. War broke out during his final year at Medical School but, as medical students did not face conscription, he was able to complete his studies graduating MB ChB in 1940. Top of his class, Bill was awarded travelling scholarships in Surgery and Obstetrics and Gynaecology and the McCallum Medal for Medicine.

Bill spent the next two years as a house surgeon in Wellington, before being called up in 1943 to join the war effort. Based initially in New Zealand, Bill was first tasked with blood-typing 50,000 military personnel, a task expected to take three months. However, with some innovative thinking, enabling the placement of multiple blood samples on a single slide, he was able to successfully complete this task in three weeks. Subsequently he was posted to the 7th Field Ambulance in New Caledonia, later serving at Guadalcanal and Vella Lavella before being returned to New Zealand.

With the ending of war, Bill was finally able to take up his travelling surgical scholarship and in 1947 he sailed to the UK intent on gaining his Fellowship. During the next three years, based at London House, he attended clinics and theatre on the London post-graduate teaching circuit including Guys, Bart's, and St Thomas Hospitals. Passing the Primary Examination was not too difficult, but the Final Examination proved demanding, and he eventually gained his FRCS in 1949. With this, he secured an appointment as resident surgeon at Southend-On-Sea, which was staffed by London visiting surgeons. Amongst them was Rodney Maingot, regarded as an expert in gall bladder and upper abdominal surgery. There, Bill also became proficient at skin grafting. In 1948 he met Patricia Fligg, of distinguished naval lineage, who worked in the MI5 and they married two years later.

Bill and Pat returned to NZ in 1951 on separate ships, Bill securing his passage as a ship's doctor for the fee of one shilling. Settling in Auckland they had three children – John, Jane and Michael. With an appointment at Auckland Hospital, Bill was initially employed as Tutor Specialist until he obtained a part-time consultant position two years later. RACS Fellowship was awarded in 1958. Bill had perfect technique, controlled and precise dissection, and made his mark as an eminent gall bladder and biliary tree surgeon, managing the few common duct carcinomas or strictures which presented. In 1968, after visiting several hospitals in the United States including the Mayo Clinic, Bill expanded his surgical practice to include breast augmentation and sex change surgery. Fiercely supportive of nursing staff, particularly theatre nurses, he was also extremely gentle with patients suffering terminal illness at a time when Hospice care was but a distant dream.

Bill Hallwright was the senior consultant that all the surgical trainees asked to work with. A very shrewd judge of a trainee's capabilities, he would gently extend their surgical repertoire over their six-month attachment, so they made good progress. An outstanding teacher of technical skills, he was an expert with economy of movement during surgery, shortening operating times. He observed that, although anyone could deliver excellent 'technical' clinical care, what really mattered was personalising care for each patient recognising their particular circumstances. He practised cost-efficient surgical care – 'always know why you are doing a test and how you hope to advance your diagnostic thinking through the answer', 'treat instruments with respect, they are expensive', 'use suture material sparingly, either the government or the patient pays for what you use' The learnings trainees gained would have been adopted for their careers, especially Bill's careful and skilled dissection techniques, and in gall bladder surgery his golden rules, and where no scissors were allowed, the Lahey right-angled forceps being the dissecting instrument of choice.

After 15 years at Auckland Hospital, he exchanged this appointment for one at Green Lane Hospital where he teamed with Keith Ewen. Following a 'sabbatical' visit to the USA in the very early 1980s, Bill brought back a full set of the equipment required for colorectal anastomoses, specifically 'anterior resections' of the rectum. This represented a major advance in the treatment of low carcinoma of the rectum, and the surgical unit at GLH led the way in using this technique in Auckland. Bill retired from his public hospital appointment in 1983 at the age of 65 years, but continued his private surgical practice, which encompassed a number of hospitals including Brightside and Rawhiti, until age 82 years.

A family bach at Lake Waikaremoana, remarkably built by Bill and brother Pont when they were 15 and 14 years old, was the focus for many family holidays, with camping and fishing being popular pursuits. In his 50s Bill learned to fly and dive. Flying was executed with the same precision as his surgery. Piloting his twin-engined Piper PA 30 Comanche aircraft, and accompanied by Pat, he made regular trips to Norfolk Island where he completed clinics and some surgery. In 1982 Bill and son, John, entered a partnership developing a 40 acre bare block in the Bay of Islands into a productive kiwifruit and persimmon orchard operation. This was a 'hands on' project including the building of a packing shed, from which the produce was exported, and later on a kitset farmhouse. This enterprise was a perfect outlet for Bill's strong skills in engineering and horticulture.

Bill generally maintained excellent health. Despite his ward at Green Lane Hospital being on the 4th Floor, Bill never took the lift and his Team always had to follow up the stairs. Although he contracted TB of the spine requiring surgery even this didn't slow him greatly. He held a driving licence until age 100 years, and at 82 years he took up golf. Aged 101 years he was still walking nine holes Monday to Friday, regularly maintaining par on at least half (and achieving a hole-in-one). Gardening was a further important activity as he maintained the acre family garden, producing large volumes of vegetables and fruit. Sadly, Patricia died in 2010, but Bill continued living independently in the family home with some live-in help necessary in the final months. Bill may have thought he was going to live forever as, aged 98 years, he decided to have solar panels installed on the house roof - observing the payback on his investment to be eight years.

Bill Hallwright lived a remarkable life and he is greatly missed by his children, John and Mike (Jane having died when aged 19) and five grandchildren, Sophie, Lucy, George, Tom and Yulia with whom he developed an incredibly close relationship.

This obituary is based upon Bill Hallwright's memoir and contributions by Mike and John Hallwright, Anne Kolbe ONZM FRACS, David Morris FRACS and Patrick Alley MNZM FRACS