

# Sir James Berry (1860-1946)

## (To the 150th Anniversary)

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### ABSTRACT

James Berry was born at Kingston, Ontario, where his father had business interests, but was educated at Whitgift School, South Croydon, London. He spent his student time at St Bartholomew's Hospital and became a fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons. Later, he became consultant surgeon and emeritus lecturer for clinical surgery at the Royal Free Hospital in London. He retired from praxis in 1927. Berry pioneered thyroid surgery in England and wrote a textbook on the subject. With his first wife he assembled and led a medical team to Serbia in World War I. They were captured by the Hungarians and repatriated through Switzerland, only to return to continue their work in Romania.

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The year of 2010 marks 150th anniversary of the prominent British surgeon—Sir James Berry. Dr J Berry was a former President of the Medical Society of London, a member of the Council of the Royal College of Surgeons, a President of the Royal Society of Medicine. He also was a known supporter of Slavic nations and took part in the 1st World War on the Russian side.

Sir James Berry (Fig. 1) was born in Kingston, Canada in February 4, 1860. When he was a child, his family moved to Great Britain, where he grew up. Despite physical defects—cleft lip, cleft palate, right foot deformity due to poliomyelitis in his childhood—J Berry was an excellent student, knew many languages and managed to keep himself physically fit. J Berry graduated from Whitgift School, Croydon, with high honors and continued his studies at St Bartholomew's Hospital. Since 1882, he worked as a chief



Fig. 1: Sir James Berry (1860-1946)

surgeon. In 1885, J Berry triumphed passing his Bachelor of Surgery test with a gold medal. In 1888, J Berry was appointed as assistant surgeon to the Royal Free Hospital and became full surgeon 2 years later. In addition to his surgical duties he gave lectures in the Women Medical School of London and worked in an infirmary for children with musculoskeletal disorders.

In 1981, Dr J Berry married Frances May Dickinson (1857-1934), who worked with him as anesthesiologist. As a bicycle fan, Dr J Berry visited many European places. Together with his wife they climbed a number of mountains, such as Eastern Alps, Pyrenees and Carpathians. They brought many photos from their trips, and familiarity with the Eastern Europe helped them a lot during the World War I.<sup>3</sup>

Dr J Berry was famous in London as a general surgeon, specializing in correction of upper lip and palate abnormalities, and also in surgical treatment of thyroid gland. At the beginning of his career as a lecturer at Kings College of Surgeons, his experience in thyroid surgery was just eight operations, in two of which the patients died. Many of his colleagues thought that he made a mistake by reporting high mortality rates, and preferred not to publish their own failures. Dr Berry, however, believed that the patients' benefit was more important than his public success.<sup>3</sup>

With time, his experience in the surgical treatment of patients with thyroid gland pathology grew. J Berry became the author of the fundamental publications on treatment of the thyroid gland diseases. Among them are "The Pathology, Diagnosis, and Surgical Treatment of Diseases of the Thyroid Gland" (1886), and "Diseases of the Thyroid Gland

and their Surgical Treatment” (1901). By 1901, James Berry had performed 126 operations on thyroid, the major indication for which was breathing problems. He was among the first to describe patients with malignant tumors of thyroid and their surgical treatment, suggested the pathogenic mechanisms of endemic goiter and thyrotoxic crisis. He was the first to describe the suspending ligament of the thyroid (Berry’ ligament, *ligamentum thyroideum laterale*). The importance of this work is hard to overestimate, since the complete separation of the thyroid lobe during surgery requires cutting Berry’ ligament. Ignoring of this anatomical structure may lead to the damage of recurrent nerve, which enters the larynx just under Berry’ ligament. In addition, J Berry made a major contribution in writing the chapter on “Malignant Diseases of the Thyroid” in Henry Butlin’s book “Operative Surgery of Malignant Diseases”(1900). Moreover, Dr J Berry published “A Manual of Surgical Diagnosis” (1904) and later, a book “Hare lip and Cleft Palate with special reference to the operative treatment and its results” (1912), where he paid attention not only to surgical correction of the anomaly but also on its inheritance and the importance of adequate speech therapy after successful surgery.<sup>2</sup>

With all his deep knowledge in surgery Dr J Berry was conservative in surgical tactics, and did not welcome novel methods that appeared at that time. He criticized surgical treatment of acute appendicitis, cesarean section, tonsillectomy, adenoidectomy, and radical surgeries in patients with disseminated tumors.<sup>3</sup> He preferred conservative treatment of acute appendicitis and suggested the draining surgery of an already formed abdominal abscess. But Dr J Berry insisted that general medical knowledge is very important for the medical education. His pupils remembered some of his aphorisms:

“The pathologist and the radiologist are responsible for a diagnostic mistake as much as the surgeon. Their conclusions should be based on clinical observation”.

“The mistake in diagnosis of surgical pathology happens not only because of lack of medical knowledge but also because of carelessness, self assurance and rush in conclusion”.

“To avoid forgetting foreign bodies in the wound, use the long strips of tissue and leave one end outside”.<sup>2</sup>

One of the prominent events in Dr J Berry’s life was his appointment as the Head of the British-Serbian Hospital (1915) during the 1st World War. In 1916 to 1917, he and



Fig. 2: Sir James and Lady Berry. British Red Cross Hospital Unit, Russia and Romania, 1916-17

his wife took part in the Red Cross operations in Romania and Russia (Fig. 2). Their main duties were to assure compliance to sanitary requirements in face of typhoid fever. When the war was over, J Berry was awarded the Order of St Sava in Serbia, the Order of St Anne in Russia and a medal in Romania. Sir J Berry and his wife were the founders of a fellowship that allowed Yugoslavian female students to study in London.

After the War, J Berry was occupying prominent positions in the Surgical Associations of Great Britain. He was the President of the London Medical Society (1921-1922), a member of Council for the Kings College of Surgeons (1923-1929), and the President of Kings Medical Society (1926- 1928). In 1934, J Berry’s wife died.<sup>1</sup> In 1935 he married, for the second time, to Mabel Marian Ingram, his colleague who accompanied him during the 1st World War.

Sir James Berry died on March 17, 1946, at the age of 86. His widow founded an award in Kings College of Surgeons named after J Berry to support the best publications in Surgery.

We remember Dr J Berry as a person who lived his life full of strong will, devotion, teamwork and humanism.

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