Norman McOmish Dott, 1897 – 1973

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He was born on August 26, 1897, of Scottish-Huguenot descent, grandson and son of celebrated Edinburgh art dealers. He was educated at George Heriot's School in Edinburgh, and was later to become president of its Former Pupil's Association. On leaving school he became an apprentice joiner and engineer, but in 1913 he sustained a severe hip injury in a motorcycle accident and whilst undergoing hospital treatment was so intrigued by medical affairs that he decided to become a medical student. His studies began in the Edinburgh University Medical School in 1914, and he was graduated M.B., Ch.B., in 1919.

During his training in general surgery, he became actively engaged in original experimental physiological work on gastric secretion and on the thyroid and pituitary glands in the department of Sharpey-Schaeffer. He took the Fellowship of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh in 1923, and became Assistant Surgeon to the Deaconess Hospital and Chalmers Hospital in Edinburgh. His important physiological studies on the pituitary gland stimulated him to seek and obtain a Rockefeller traveling fellowship, enabling him to become a junior associate in neurological surgery in the Peter Bent Brigham Hospital in Boston, Massachusetts, under Dr. Harvey Cushing in 1923-1924. This unique experience with this most distinguished pioneer decided Professor Dott...
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Dott’s future career in medicine, and although he returned to work in pediatric surgery in the Royal Hospital for Sick Children in Edinburgh, becoming surgeon in ordinary there in 1925, he developed an increasing and intense interest in the new medical specialty of “surgical neurology” (the term he always preferred). From 1925 to 1931 he worked mainly in private nursing homes in Edinburgh, carrying the special operating table-top which he had designed around with him in his car. His determination and dedication eventually convinced his medical colleagues and the hospital administration authorities that there was a real place for surgical neurology as a specialty, and in 1931 he was appointed neurological surgeon to the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary, and the following year, lecturer in neurological surgery in the University of Edinburgh.

Thus the academic, teaching, and research aspects of the new specialty were formally recognized.

Now followed the hard road ahead towards the consolidation of the specialty of surgical neurology. Although the physical facilities were limited, he attracted loyal colleagues and assistants, nurses, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, speech therapists, and others and so gradually developed the most comprehensive department of surgical neurology in the United Kingdom. During the 1939-45 World War he established and was director of the brain injuries unit in Bangour Emergency Medical Services Hospital (near Edinburgh). Neurosurgery further flourished there, as well as in the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh. He eventually convinced the authorities that a new specially built, comprehensive department of surgical neurology was essential and that it should be an integral part of a general hospital. This became a reality in the Western General Hospital in Edinburgh in 1960. Elective surgical neurology was carried out there, while cases of neurotraumatology were treated in the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh. In 1947 Professor Dott was appointed to the Forbes Chair of Neurological Surgery in the University of Edinburgh, a position he held until his retirement in 1962 at the age of 65 years. He was consultant neurosurgeon to the Army in Scotland.

In his earlier years as a doctor he showed exceptional qualities of observation and innovation. He helped to develop anesthesia in Edinburgh, and introduced endotracheal techniques. He made original contributions on the embryology of the bowel. One of the many surgical instruments that he invented, and helped to make, was an intestinal anastomosis clamp which is still in current use, and indeed his first publication (1920) was on “a new gastro-enterostomy clamp.” Using sodium iodine, he was the first person in the United Kingdom to demonstrate an arteriovenous malformation of the brain by angiography (1929); and in March, 1932, using Thorotrast, he performed the first angiogram in the United Kingdom to show a saccular intracranial aneurysm. In 1931 he was the first surgeon to treat a middle cerebral artery aneurysm by wrapping the lesion with crushed muscle. Other original clinical research activities included studies on intestinal disorders, congenital dislocation of the hip, cleft palate, the pituitary gland, the circulation and pathology of the cerebrospinal fluid, vascular lesions of the brain, brain displacements and related cerebral vascular lesions, head injuries, spinal cord compression and in particular Potter’s paraplegia, facial pain, the treatment of facial paralysis by an extrapetrous nerve graft, and the use of hypotension and of hypothermia in neurosurgery. His many publications also include papers on neuroophthalmology, neuro-rehabilitation, and medical education.

He was involved in the activities of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh of which he was vice president from 1956 to 1967. In 1966 he was appointed a member of the General Medical Council. Both in surgical neurology and in medicine in general, Norman Dott was vitally involved in many committees and commissions in Scotland and in countries throughout the world. He was intimately associated with the work of the Society of British Neurological Surgeons, of which he was president from 1939 to 1945. He showed a particular interest in the training of doctors to become specialists in this field. The British Medical Association also attracted his attention, and from 1954 to 1962 he was on the Senior Consultants and Specialists Committee for