

Seminal Moments in Canadian Urology



Dr Robert Douglas Jeffs was born in 1924 into a medical family in Toronto. He was educated at the prestigious Upper Canada College and then decided to pursue medicine. However, his pre-med studies were put on hold as he joined the Royal Canadian Air Force and flew Tiger Moths during World War II. After the war, Jeffs returned to Toronto to complete his medical education. Upon graduation from University of Toronto medical school he served an internship at Toronto Western Hospital in 1949. He completed his surgical training in Toronto, encompassing both general surgery and urology, in 1955. He was then awarded a McLaughlin Travelling Fellowship and went to Great Ormond Street Hospital in London where he worked with the father of Pediatric Urology, Mr. D.I. Williams.

On returning to Toronto in 1957, Bob was appointed Chief of Pediatric Urology at SickKids, the first urologist in Canada dedicated to the care of children. Jeffs grew the pediatric urology service, and was notably the first surgeon to close a bladder exstrophy in Toronto. It was during his time at SickKids that Jeffs, an ever exacting surgeon, honed his skills and focused his philosophy on bladder exstrophy reconstruction, arguably one of the most difficult problems facing pediatric urologists. He worked in collaboration with orthopedic colleagues such as Dr. Robert Salter in formulating the staged approach to bladder exstrophy closure, which included a pelvic osteotomy.

In 1975 Jeffs was recruited by Patrick Walsh to head the Pediatric Urology division at Johns Hopkins Hospital. This new venue and his ever growing reputation allowed Jeffs to continue his innovations in bladder exstrophy closure. The modern staged closure of bladder exstrophy was his brain child, and as of 2010 a total of 1000 exstrophy patients had sought care at Johns Hopkins! Jeffs retired from practice in 1997. Bob received the esteemed American Academy of Pediatrics Urology Section medal in 1999, and the Robert D Jeffs Professorship in Pediatric Urology at Johns Hopkins was established post-humously in his honor in 2010.

Although the latter part of his professional career was in the USA, Bob was a true Canadian. He loved spending time at his family cottage on Georgian Bay, enjoyed Gordon Lightfoot tunes, and never tired of lamenting about the misfortunes of his beloved Maple Leafs. He trained several current or past Canadian pediatric urologists including Hjalmar Johnson, Romeo Charrois, Bernie Churchill, John Schillinger, John Masterson and Michael Leonard. They in turn have carried forth his legacy to train others who currently practice in Canada. This kind and gentle man, known to his trainees as "RDJ", passed away on August 28, 2006. His contributions to the field of pediatric urology, and specifically the management of bladder exstrophy, should make every Canadian urologist proud.