

William John Horsey, M.D., F.R.C.S.C

Neurosurgeon to St. Michael's Hospital, Toronto

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After just completing his neurosurgical training in 1954 Dr. William Horsey visited Queen Square, England, where on one occasion he attended a pathological conference discussing a young man who had died from complications following biopsy of a low grade astrocytoma. One of the surgeons present, none other than the brilliant, mercurial and sometimes flamboyant Wylie McKissock, asked young Horsey what he thought of the case. What followed was not the primitive, colonial opinion that might have been expected. Unintimidated, Dr. Horsey said that he probably would not have operated on the man in the first place, since he was neurologically well-preserved bearing an intrinsic tumor causing minimal deformity of the ventriculogram. But if he had operated, Horsey went on, he would have finished the job with a proper decompression of the affected temporal lobe, rather than just a biopsy. And, he continued, if he had made the decision to treat this young man's tumor, he would also have treated his postoperative clot, with a second operation, to save the patient's life. It was this kind of sharp intelligence and sensibility, which so silenced a crowded Queen Square conference room that morning, combined with a superb operating technique and a particular dedication to teaching that characterized Bill Horsey's neurosurgical career.

William John Horsey was born October 18, 1920, at the Toronto General Hospital, into a conservative, middle-class, nonmedical family with a strong work ethic. He attended public and then the University of Toronto schools, and following graduation in 1938 entered the University of Toronto at age 17, already intent on becoming a doctor. World War II and a need for medical graduates for the armed services had accelerated the medical program at that time, so that Horsey was able to graduate from medical school in 1944, silver medallist in his class, and following internship at St. Michael's Hospital was commissioned directly into the Canadian Army. Following discharge in 1946 and then a year as demonstrator in anatomy at the University of Toronto, he was accepted into the Gallie surgical training course. Horsey had almost completed his general surgical

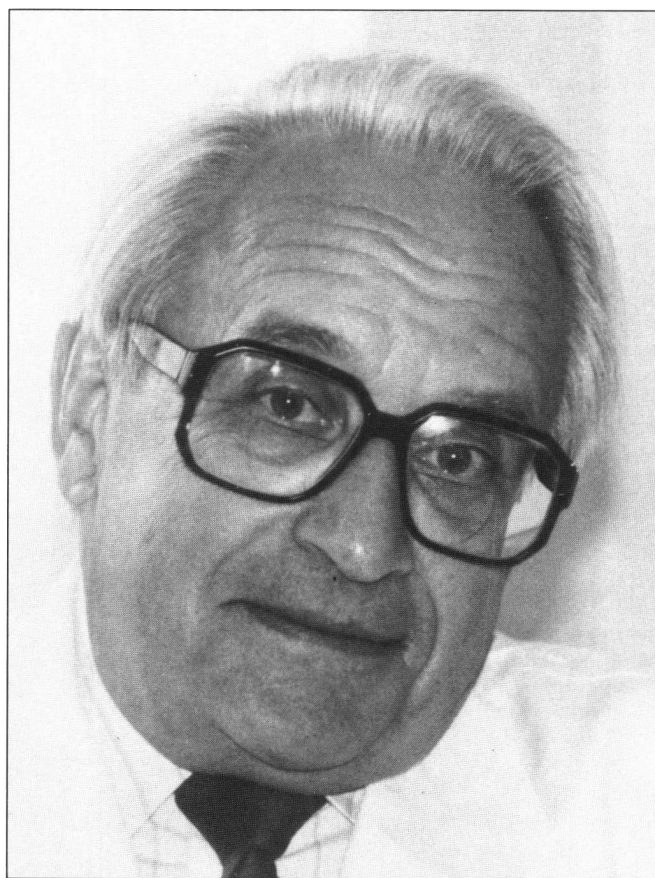


Figure 1 — Dr. William J. Horsey, 1992

training, much of it at St. Michael's Hospital, when the chief surgeon at that hospital, the distinguished Dr. W. Keith Welsh, suggested he spend time in neurosurgery at Toronto General and

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then return to St. Michael's as a neurosurgeon. Hitherto Horsey had never given much thought to this particular area of surgery, and it was the combination of Dr. Welsh's great influence on young Horsey, and the recognition of the hospital's need, that persuaded Horsey to start training again, as a neurosurgeon.

Dr. Horsey spent his introductory three months as assistant resident to Dr. Kenneth G. McKenzie, and like all of those who worked with Canada's first neurosurgeon was impressed by McKenzie's great clinical acumen and technical skill. When Dr. E. Harry Botterell succeeded McKenzie as head of neurosurgery at Toronto General Hospital in 1952, Dr. Horsey became his first chief resident, with Drs. William Lougheed and Edward Simmons his juniors. These three young men shared a common, modest height, so that Harry Botterell, a tall man made even taller by his imposing and dominating demeanor, towered above them. The sight of this group on the wards, and the occasional difficulty the residents had in assisting Dr. Botterell with their heads in his direct line of vision, sometimes had comic overtones. Dr. Horsey remembers Dr. Botterell then as a hard taskmaster who insisted on their dedication to the responsibilities of a neurosurgical resident. He expected the impossible from his residents and usually got it. The process of being trained by Harry was dubbed "Botterellization", and Horsey recalls being "Botterellized" from time to time. However, it was clear to Horsey that Dr. Botterell was no harder on him than he was on himself, and that Botterell's driving motivation was the provision of excellent patient care and neurosurgical training. This trait and these motivations became Dr. Horsey's own.

Dr. Horsey obtained his fellowship in neurosurgery in 1954. The oral exam quickly degenerated into jocular bantering between the examiners Harry Botterell and Arthur Elvidge when the candidate was able to identify not only the diagnoses of the patients whose x-rays Botterell had brought, but their names as well.

Following six months at Queen Square with neurologist Arnold Carmichael, Horsey joined the staff at St. Michael's Hospital, Toronto in 1954, to become their first full-time neurosurgeon. The following year he became consultant neurosurgeon at St. Joseph's hospital, an appointment he would maintain his whole career. It was nothing less than an obsession with his work that enabled Dr. Horsey to persevere through the difficult, early years of his practice, when acquiring a neurosurgical operating room, scrub nurse and surgical equipment, and singlehandedly establishing a neurosurgical service, took great determination. In time, Horsey was able to develop a strong neurosurgical "team" at St. Michael's Hospital, including in particular devoted and capable nursing staff members such as Mary Allen, Valery Zellermeier, and Yvonne Erwin. Neurosurgery at St. Michael's also benefitted from Horsey's close association with neurologist Dr. Joe Marotta. These two contemporaries were able to integrate neurology and neurosurgery in the early, formative years, facilitating patient care and contributing to the training of residents from both specialties.

Dr. Horsey played an important role in maintaining St. Michael's reputation as one of the leading service and teaching

hospitals in the country. He was an excellent and tireless educator of undergraduates and neurosurgery residents alike, always preferring students to reach answers to questions through their own deductive reasoning, which he would direct with great subtlety and obvious pleasure. He has said of himself that he doesn't think he has ever taught anything, but that he hoped he has helped a few people to learn. Even as one of Toronto's senior neurosurgeons, he would enthusiastically undertake and teach trauma surgery to the head and spine, at any time of the day or night. He became a notable spinal surgeon, and in Toronto kept that aspect of surgery firmly in the realm of neurosurgery. He was one of Canada's early and strong proponents of the anterior approach to the cervical spine. He took up microsurgery enthusiastically in the late 1960's, and early on became interested in transsphenoidal surgery, continuing a career-long interest in pituitary tumors.

Dr. Horsey has remarked that at the time he joined the University of Toronto faculty, a surgeon was expected to be a good operator and a good teacher, but that the latter role has since gone through phases of being ignored and rediscovered. An additional expectation was to do research or administration, and Horsey became an administrator. He succeeded his mentor and friend Dr. Keith Welsh as Chief of Surgery at St. Michael's Hospital in 1966, and served in that position until 1982. In 1969 he also became Chairman of the Medical Advisory Board, the equivalent of chief of staff, and he held that position also until 1982. For over a decade Horsey's energies were divided between one of the busiest neurosurgical practices in Canada, heading the department of surgery, and the demanding job of running, along with Dr. John Platt (medical director) and Sister Mary, St. Michael's Hospital on a day to day basis. Not surprisingly, Dr. Horsey's devout allegiance to the United Church of Canada (he taught Sunday School in his parish for many years) was no barrier to a very close relationship with Sister Mary.

However, Dr. Horsey's principal motivation never faltered. His trainees, many now senior neurosurgeons throughout the world, remember him as a sensitive and very gentlemanly physician who cared compassionately for not only patients but also their families. They remember the endless, often late hours Horsey spent with families, and the particular care he took in corresponding with referring physicians. He taught them the performance of operative neurosurgery, but showed them, by example, how to be a good doctor. He became a father figure to many residents, winning their respect and confidence and enabling them to keep him fully informed without fear of acrimony or loss of experience and work that he provided them.

Dr. Horsey retired from active neurosurgery in 1985 at age 65, to accept a position with the Workers' Compensation Board, in Toronto, which he still holds. Not having visibly aged in the last 15 years, he enjoys an active lifestyle with his lovely wife Betty. He has two children from his first marriage, daughter Nan and son Richard, and acquired four more daughters in his second: Mary, Sarah, Carol and Rebecca.