

Connaught's Healthy Heritage Canada's "Mr. Public Health"

Dr. Robert D. Defries, perhaps the most important person in Connaught's history, died twenty years ago on October 25, 1975. While Dr. J.G. FitzGerald created Connaught in 1913-14, Defries built this institution and the School of Hygiene, serving as Director of both between 1940 and 1955. At the same time he quietly left a permanent mark on the larger evolution of Canadian public health. Today, Defries' legacy deserves special celebration for many reasons. His greatest achievement came 40 years ago during the dramatic introduction of the Salk polio vaccine.

"Dr. Bob," as he was often called, had deep family roots in Toronto. He came from a family of successful brewers until Robert's mother, a deeply religious woman, kept her two sons out of the business and guided them into university. Robert, also known as "Curly," received an MD. from the University of Toronto in 1912, followed by a Diploma in Public Health in 1914. He was also very religious and considered becoming a medical missionary, but in 1917 was persuaded by Dr. FitzGerald to help develop Connaught. In 1915, Dr. Defries' first job at Connaught was to prepare tetanus antitoxin for the Armed Services. By 1917 he was appointed Associate Director, a position he held until 1940 when he became Director after the untimely death of Dr. FitzGerald.

Dr. Defries never married and his personal life was inseparable from his scientific, teaching and administrative work at Connaught and the

School. He was also the backbone of the Canadian Public Health Association from 1915 and served as the Editor of its journal between 1918 and 1964. Between 1940 and 1962 Dr. Defries was also a leader on the Dominion Council of Health, Ottawa's health advisory body, and worked closely with the American Public Health Association. Dr. Defries published some 60 papers in the fields of bacteriology, epidemiology, immunology and public health, including *The First Forty Years*, a history of Connaught up to 1955.

"Dr. Bob's" philosophy worked on the principle that men and women could be led or persuaded to do the impossible if you simply recognized their existence and took them seriously, but not too seriously. At Connaught this philosophy paid big dividends with the production of insulin in the early 1920s, meeting the wartime demands for millions of doses of tetanus toxoid and other less common biologicals, and the preparation of dried human blood serum and penicillin during the early 1940s.

Dr. Defries' most dramatic accomplishment came during the introduction of the Salk vaccine. After Connaught had developed "Medium 199" and the "Toronto Technique" of rocked bottle polio virus cultures, in July 1953 the U.S. March of Dimes asked Dr. Defries to take on the "Herculean task" of supplying all the bulk polio virus fluids for the 1954 Salk vaccine field trial. Dr. Defries personally guided this project, but it was during the infamous "Cutter Crisis" of 1955 when Dr. Defries' confident leadership really counted. A number of vaccine-associated polio cases forced the cancellation of the U.S. vaccine program. However, under Dr. Defries' direction in planning, production and testing Connaught's vaccine, the government-sponsored Canadian program continued with no problems. This Canadian success story attracted considerable American attention and led to Dr. Defries being awarded the Albert Lasker Award from the American Public Health Association in November 1955. This award coincided with Dr. Defries' retirement and capped an important and memorable career.



On November 17, 1955, Dr. Defries was awarded the Albert Lasker Award by the American Public Health Association, presented by former U.S. President Harry Truman in recognition of his leadership in the introduction of the Salk vaccine and a lifelong career in public health.

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