

# Alfred Webb-Johnson: surgeon and administrator

May 28 2008 marks the 50th anniversary of the death of Baron Arthur Webb-Johnson GCV, CBE, DSO, whose ability as a medical administrator has a lasting memorial in the modern Royal College of Surgeons of England in Lincoln's Inn Fields, London.

He was born in 1880 in Stoke-on-Trent, where his father, Dr Samuel Johnson MD, was the Medical Officer of Health. Much influenced by his mother, Arthur incorporated her maiden surname, Webb, into his own. Webb-Johnson trained at Manchester University and rose to surgical registrar at the Manchester Royal Infirmary. He came to the Middlesex Hospital as resident medical officer and here came under the influence of that great gynaecological surgeon John Bland-Sutton, later to become President of the Royal College of Surgeons. Keenly interested in urology, Webb-Johnson visited the urological clinics in Vienna, Berlin and Berne, and was appointed to the surgical staff at the Middlesex Hospital in 1911.

Webb-Johnson was a keen Territorial Army officer and commanded the University of London Officers Training Corps. In the early days of the first World War, he was posted as surgeon to what was to become the famous 14th General Hospital, at Wimereux in Northern France, later becoming its commanding officer and then consultant surgeon to the whole Boulogne area. His distinguished service was recognized by his being decorated with the CBE and the DSO. There is no doubt that this wartime experience honed his undoubted skills as an administrator.

Returning to peacetime London, Webb-Johnson established the urological department at the Middlesex Hospital and developed a reputation as a popular teacher of his students. However, it was now his

administrative skills that soon established his reputation. In 1923 he made an extensive tour of hospitals and medical schools in North America. Two years later, with the old Middlesex Hospital at risk of finally collapsing, he was appointed chairman of the rebuilding committee. Now Webb-Johnson's organizing abilities, first seen on the western front during the war, came into their own.

Under the slogan 'The Middlesex Hospital is Falling Down', he led the appeal which soon raised £1.25 million, now a large, then an enormous sum of money. A magnificent new hospital arose and the board paid him the unique compliment of naming a ward after him, into

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which he could admit his own patients.

Sadly, like so many other great institutions in the NHS, the Middlesex Hospital has recently been sold off and will become yet another block of luxury flats.

In 1936, Webb-Johnson was knighted and was appointed surgeon to Queen Mary (wife of King George V).

On the night of 10 May 1941, at the height of the Blitz on London, a stick of incendiary bombs fell on the Royal College of Surgeons, followed by a high-explosive bomb; two further high-explosive bombs fell nearby. The College suffered extensive damage from fire and blast – two thirds of the original Hunterian specimens in the museum were destroyed.

The College moved its activities temporarily to the Examinations Hall in Queen Square. Two months later, Webb-Johnson, who had been on its Council since 1932, was elected President of the Royal College of Surgeons, a post he was to hold until

1949, a record period, far exceeding the normal term of 3 years. He immediately went into the fray. Wreckage was cleared, a temporary roof erected, and the College examinations and teaching programmes were continued throughout the war. At its end, Webb-Johnson threw himself into fund raising, from the Fellows, the public and from wealthy benefactors, which included Lord Nuffield and Sir Simon Marks. The new College literally arose from its ashes – its lecture theatres and museums restored, indeed, enhanced, as well as new, much needed, research laboratories and a residential, Nuffield, College, for postgraduate students. Faculties of Dentistry (1947) and Anaesthetics (1948)

were established, and the specialist surgical societies were provided with office space and secretarial help in the College premises. By April 1954, the first public use of the new great hall was made – appropriately for the delivery of a Hunterian lecture.

Webb-Johnson's dream, which he did his best to achieve with all his powers of persuasion, was an Academy of Medicine. He envisioned

this incorporating all three Colleges – Medicine, Obstetrics and Gynaecology as well as Surgery – together with a College of General Practice, established in what had been the wreckage of Lincoln's Inn Fields. Sadly this was not to be – more's the pity.

Webb-Johnson became a Baronet in 1945 and a peer in 1948. He was a moderating influence in the heated discussions about the establishment of the NHS in 1948, but he was not an enthusiastic debater on medico-political issues in the House of Lords, preferring always his direct approach. He was a great man, a brilliant organizer and a leader of the profession – we could do with such a man today. The Royal College of Surgeons of England, its buildings and its wide activities remains as a living memorial to the man. **BJHM**

*Conflict of interest: none.*

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