

# Sir Adolphe Abrahams: physician and Olympics medical officer

**T**his year is the 50th anniversary of the death of Sir Adolphe Abrahams, a distinguished physician, an athlete and long-serving medical officer to the British Olympics Games team.

Adolphe Abrahams was born in Cape Town in 1883. His parents moved to London and he was educated at Bedford School, where he was an exhibitioner, and then at Emmanuel College, Cambridge, where he was a Foundation Scholar. Here he obtained 1st class honours in the Natural Science Tripos before proceeding to St. Bartholomew's Hospital for his clinical studies, obtaining his Conjoint diploma in 1909 and his Cambridge MB, BChir 2 years later. After holding resident appointments at Bart's, he joined the Royal Army Medical Corps at the outbreak of the First World War, at first as a Regimental Medical Officer in Flanders, where he served with distinction and bravery, being mentioned in dispatches, before being promoted to physician in charge of the medical division at the Cambridge Hospital, Aldershot and then as Consultant Physician to Aldershot Command, ending the war with the rank of major and being appointed Order of the British Empire in 1919.

After demobilization, Abrahams was appointed Assistant Physician at Westminster Hospital (then in the old building, beautifully situated opposite Westminster Abbey). He was also physician at the Royal Chest Hospital, at Chislehurst Hospital and at Hampstead General Hospital (now the site of the Royal Free Hospital).

At Westminster, Abrahams devoted himself to the medical school, serving successively as lecturer, tutor and then as Dean, a post he held from 1934 until 1940. He was a truly 'general' physician, although with a particular interest in the

gastrointestinal system. He edited the *Postgraduate Medical Journal* for many years, wrote papers on colitis and urinary diseases and, together with his brother Harold, an athlete and sports journalist, published a book entitled *Training for Health and Athletics* in 1936. When I took over as editor of *French's Index of Differential Diagnosis*, many years ago, I was delighted to come into possession of an old edition of this work, from Abrahams' time as editor, heavily annotated by him, in his characteristic tiny, but easily read, handwriting.

“ Abrahams served as medical officer to the British Olympics teams from the 1912 games in Stockholm to the 1936 games in Berlin ”

Abrahams, together with his two younger brothers, had a lifetime's interest in sport. At Cambridge he excelled in the 100, 220 and 440 yard events. Later, he wrote extensively on the health and physiology of athletes and on sports injuries. He took a leading part in founding the British Association of Sport and Medicine, together with the surgeon Sir Arthur Porritt, himself an Olympic gold medallist. Abrahams served as medical officer to the British Olympics teams from the 1912 games in Stockholm to the 1936 games in Berlin and he was also honorary medical advisor to the International Athletics Board. For all these services he received a well-deserved knighthood.

Incidentally, Sir Adolphe's youngest brother, Harold, won the gold medal in the 100-yard sprint at the Paris Olympic Games of 1924. His victory was featured in that splendid film *Chariots of Fire*.

My first encounter with Sir Adolphe was in 1963, less than a year after I was appointed Professor of Surgery at Westminster Medical School. I was called to the casualty department by my house surgeon one evening

to see a woman admitted with undoubted intestinal obstruction. I was told that she was the sister of Sir Adolphe Abrahams, who had accompanied her into hospital. I explained that she required urgent surgery that evening and I asked him if he would like me to call in one of my senior colleagues. 'No', he replied, 'all you surgeons are very good. Now, if it was a physician she needed, that would be difficult. Horder was good [he was referring to Lord Horder, of St. Bartholomew's], but he is dead.' I am glad to say that his sister did well after her colonic resection.

Adolphe's sister later told me that she too had been a very good athlete as a girl, and was well able to pace her brothers. She was therefore quite certain that she would have gained a medal for the 100 yards in the 1924 Games. Women were admitted to the next, 1928, Games but by that time she was married and expecting a baby.

Sir Adolphe retained his interest in sport and physical fitness throughout his long life, regarding it as an antidote to the consequences of modern existence. His Arris and Gale lecture at the Royal College of Surgeons in 1928 was on the physiology of violent exercise. As late as 1960 he published a book entitled *Disabilities and Injuries of Athletics and Sport*. He scoffed at golf as a sport for young men, which he claimed was an exercise for the middle aged and elderly. When he was past middle age he had a biopsy performed on his radial artery, which was sent to Professor Sharpey-Schafer, the eminent histologist. Adolphe was delighted with the report that the artery had the microscopic appearance of that of a young man. At the age of 70 years, he was still capable of running 100 yards in 12 seconds, and it was his practice, well into his 70s, to run round Regent's Park every Saturday, come rain or shine.

Sir Adolphe died at his home after some months of ill health on 11 December 1967. I have the fondest memories of this extraordinary physician on this 50th anniversary of his death. **BJHM**

*Conflict of interest: none.*

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