

## Sir Denis Browne (1892-1967), the father of paediatric surgery in Britain\*

Peter M. Dunn, MA, MD, FRCP, FRCOG,  
FRCPCH

Emeritus Professor of Perinatal Medicine and  
Child Health, University of Bristol  
(P.M.Dunn@bristol.ac.uk)

Denis Browne, DB to his friends and colleagues, was born in Melbourne, Australia on April 2nd, 1892<sup>(1,2)</sup>. His parents had married two years earlier. His father, Captain Sylvester Browne had emigrated from England, while his mother was the daughter of Sir William Foster Stawill who had reached Australia from Ireland in 1856; there he rose to become first the Chief Justice, and then the Lord Lieutenant of Victoria.

In 1901, when DB was nine, the family moved to a large sheep farm in New South Wales where he grew up, becoming a fine shot and a superb horseman. He received his education at King's School, Paramatta and then, with a scholarship, studied medicine at the University of Sydney, graduating in 1914 at the age of 22. The Great War had just begun and he volunteered at once for service in the RAMC. 1915 found him with the Anzacs in Gallipoli but on contracting typhoid he was invalided back to Australia. After convalescence he returned to Europe and, with the rank of major, took command of a field ambulance in France.

Following the war DB came to England, and having obtained the FRCS in 1922, became first the casualty registrar and then in 1925 the Resident Medical Superintendent (RSM) of the Hospital for Sick Children, Great Ormond Street, London. In 1928 he was appointed consultant surgeon to the hospital and served there for the remaining 40 years of his life, being created emeritus surgeon on his retirement in 1957. He died at the age of 74 on January 9th, 1967.

So much for the bare outline of his life.

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Based on a paper read to  
The British Society for the History of  
Paediatrics and Child Health,  
York, April 1st, 2004



Fig 1  
Sir Denis Browne, 1892-1967.

But what about the man? He was tall and handsome with craggy eyebrows (Fig 1). Besides being a first-rate shot and horseman, he also played tennis to a Wimbledon standard. He enjoyed the company of women and defied the Great Ormond Street edict that residents should remain single. While RMS he secretly married Helen Simpson, a successful writer, and they bought a flat in Sloane Street. When this came to light he nearly lost his job. They had one daughter before his wife's early death in 1940. In 1945 DB remarried. His second wife, Lady Moira Ponsonby, was a nurse who later became Superintendent of the St. John's Ambulance Brigade. It was another happy partnership and they had two children, a son and a daughter.

DB was a complex person. Although he could be brash and intolerant, he also had great charm and the ability to inspire the admiration and loyalty of his team and friends. While being ambitious and egotistical, there was also a shy and sensitive aspect to his makeup. At the same time he was kind and considerate, had a boyish sense of fun and was at his best with children. In his work DB pursued perfection. He was a brilliant

and inventive surgeon with an enquiring mind and great technical skill. At the same time he had enormous energy, but never gave the impression of being in a hurry. When he was 'in thought' he had the ability to shut himself off from the rest of the world. DB never conformed to established practice. Following wide reading and study he then sought a logical solution to any problem confronting him. He had great strength of character and firm convictions, and was a rebel who courted controversy. Taking nothing at face value he had a disdain for the conventional approach and a contempt for bureaucracy, hypocrisy and pomposity. He enjoyed battling against anything or anybody he regarded as ignorant, prejudiced or incompetent, and never gave an inch in debate. Being blunt and having a pungent wit, he made plenty of professional enemies, as well as many friends.

Denis Browne's studies and teachings covered the whole field of paediatric surgery – hypospadias, hare lip and cleft palate, neonatal intestinal obstruction, imperforate anus, maldescent of the testicles, ligation of the patent ductus arteriosus, tongue tie – and the list could go on<sup>(3)</sup>. Undoubtedly though his most important contribution was in the recognition that a range of congenital deformities were due to mechanical compression before birth. Between 1931 and 1967 a series of his articles appeared in the journals on this theme<sup>(4-6)</sup> and on the early management of postural deformities, including talipes, congenital dislocation of the hip, sternomastoid torticollis and congenital postural scoliosis.

Browne's approach was based on clinical observation and anatomical dissection accompanied by wide reading and adoption of the Baconian method of inductive reasoning.

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In 1936 he wrote about the aetiology of congenital deformation as follows<sup>(4)</sup>:

“To prove the question one way or another by direct observation is at present impossible, and it appears likely ever to remain so. In consequence I am reduced to a method that might possibly be used more in medicine than it is, the method of comparing what abstract argument shows to be the consequence of the granting of the hypothesis under test with what is actually found in real life. If the results of abstract inductive reasoning of this sort coincide with those of observation over a wide and complicated range, the truth of the hypothesis on which the reasoning was conducted is proved as nearly as absolutely as most things can be in this world.”

DB recognised that the newborn infant



Fig 2 Compressed fetus in-utero. From D. Browne, courtesy of the Royal Society of Medicine <sup>(4)</sup>.

could be readily folded up into its prenatal posture soon after birth and that the moulding deformities, when present, appeared to be dictated by mutual pressure within the womb or by the shape of the intrauterine container (Fig 2).

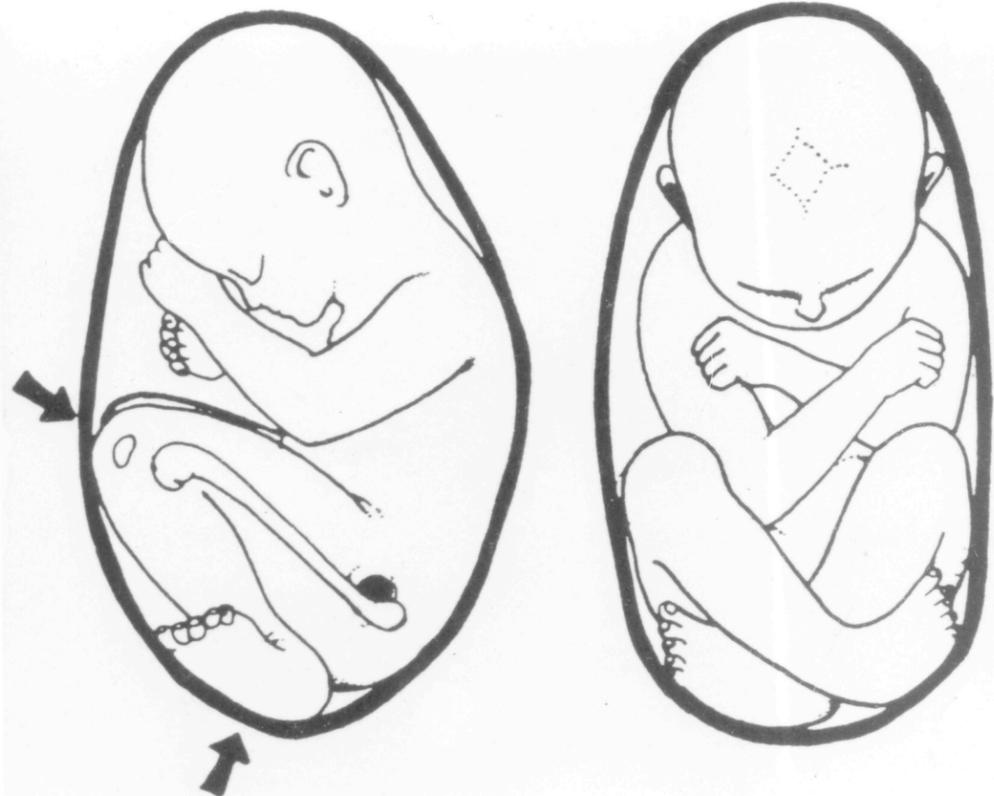


Fig 3 Fetal positions associated with valgus (on left) and varus (on right) deformities of the feet. From D. Browne, courtesy of the Australian and New Zealand Journal of Surgery <sup>(7)</sup>.

In Fig 3 <sup>(7)</sup> may be seen on the left the posture favouring talipes calcaneo-valgus and congenital dislocation of the hip, two deformities which often go together, and, on the right, the posture favouring clubfeet or talipes equino-varus. Browne also noted that most children with moulding deformities were otherwise perfectly normally formed.

Although the idea of mechanical deformation in-utero was not new – it dates back to Hippocrates<sup>(8)</sup> as Browne acknowledged – the concept was widely rejected by the profession during his lifetime, much to his frustration. His letters to the journals became more and more angry, particularly those directed at the orthopaedic community<sup>(9)</sup>. To be fair to his critics, DB did include one or two serious errors in his hypothesis; first he suggested that hydramnios caused arthrogyrosis, and second, that prenatal pressure on the embryo might be responsible for spina bifida. These mistaken beliefs weakened his general argument.

At this point I wish to inject a personal recollection of DB. It came about as follows: Between 1958 and 1962 I was working as paediatric registrar at the Birmingham Maternity Hospital

and writing a thesis on the aetiology of congenital postural deformities for a Cambridge MD based on observations I had made on the babies in my care <sup>(10)</sup>. In 1961 I was invited to give a lecture at the Robert Jones and Agnes Hunt Orthopaedic Hospital in Oswestry. While preparing my talk, someone mentioned that I must be a disciple of Denis Browne. As at that time I had never even heard of Sir Denis or of his theory, I went at once to the library and sought out his publications. My delight was great at finding the similarity between his and my own observations and conclusions. I wrote at once to him acknowledging this. His reply 42 years ago in 1962 read as follows:

“Dear Dr. Dunn,  
Your letter interested and cheered me quite a lot. If my work is carried on it must be by juniors, since to admit that obvious facts and principles have been overlooked would involve far too great a loss of face for Professors to consider. This is not cynicism, it is the fruit of considerable experience and study of human reactions. However, I notice the first signs of the normal change from being a wild theoriser to becoming a bore telling people what they knew already. I wish there was an intermediate stage in which one’s colleagues would say, “You seem to have got some interesting stuff there. Would you explain exactly what it is?” However, this never occurs.

Yours sincerely, Denis Browne”



# West of England Medical Journal

Formerly Bristol Medico-Chirurgical Journal



The e-journal of the  
Bristol Medico-Chirurgical Society

WEMJ Volume 112 No 4 Article number 1 December 2013

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Later I had the opportunity to meet Sir Denis when he visited Bristol shortly before his death. He would be happy to know that the hypothesis that he pursued so vigorously throughout his life became firmly established after his death. The 9th edition of the World Health Organisation's Classification of Diseases in 1977<sup>(11)</sup> which I helped to prepare, took account of it and David Smith, the doyen of dysmorpology in Seattle, acknowledged that he had based his book 'Recognizable Patterns of Human Deformation'<sup>(12)</sup> in 1981 on my MD thesis and, of course, DB's hypothesis.

Denis Browne was the first surgeon in Britain to confine his practice to children and he came to be recognised as the father of paediatric surgery in the UK. Many honours came his way. He was Hunterian professor on four occasions; he was awarded the Dawson Williams prize; and also the William Ladd medal of the USA. France made him a Chevalier Legion d'Honneur, and in 1961 he was appointed a Knight (KCVO) for services to our Royal family. On returning to Australia for the first time in 50 years in 1965 he was made an Honorary Fellow of their Surgical College. In 1954 DB helped to found the British Association of Paediatric Surgeons and was then elected its first president. After his death the Association struck a medal in his honour "to mark an outstanding contribution to paediatric surgery" with the additional comment, characteristic of DB, that "the aim of paediatric surgery is to set a standard, not to seek a monopoly". It provides a suitable epitaph for a life devoted to the service of children with surgical problems.

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