



Who was Dr Arthur Harold Gale and why is a memorial lecture named after him?

Dr. Paul Main, MA FRCGP FHEA
Retired GP, RCGP Severn Faculty Provost 2004-8

DR ARTHUR HAROLD GALE
DM DPH (1901-1956)

First Director of Postgraduate Medical Studies and Lecturer in Epidemiology, University of Bristol.

Dr Arthur Harold Gale was the first Director of Postgraduate Medical Studies and a lecturer in Epidemiology at the University of Bristol¹. He was a good friend to the South Western Faculty of the Royal College of General Practitioners who decided to preserve his memory with the annual Gale Memorial Lecture, when he died prematurely on 12th October 1956, aged 55, leaving his wife and two children.

He was born on 31 August 1901, the younger son of a Sheffield GP². He was educated at Dover College and Trinity College, Oxford. After taking his BA in physiology, his clinical training was at University College Hospital (UCH), where he qualified in 1926 and graduated BM BCh the following year. Following house surgeon and house physician posts at UCH and having obtained the Diploma in Public Health, he became an assistant medical officer of health and assistant school medical officer to Surrey County Council. Here his physiological bent led him to become interested in the testing of children's hearing with the gramophone audiometer, and this formed the subject of the thesis that secured him the Doctorate of Medicine of Oxford in 1933.

At 32 years of age, he was selected from nearly 50 applicants for the post of Medical Officer to the Board of Education, where his natural gift for establishing good personal relationships was of great value. He worked under Sir George Newman and Dr R H Crowley. One of his first tasks was to investigate the effect of the economic depression on the nutrition of children. His clinical judgment was always sound, and he got on well

with children, schoolmasters, medical officers and importantly educational committees. He was at his best dealing with the problems of the treatment and education of handicapped children, work which he carried out with skill and great tact and sympathy. He was an ideal colleague: modest, serene, kind, always ready to help, and as well liked by his opposite numbers on the administrative side as by his fellow medical officers. During the war he assisted the Ministry of Health in many ways, including the nightly inspections of air-raid shelters. He carried out numerous important epidemiological investigations whilst working as a medical officer at the Board of Education and at the Ministry of Health.

His work in the epidemiology of the infectious diseases of children generated wide interest. In 1944 he was the Milroy Lecturer at the Royal College of Physicians, speaking on "A Century of Changes in the Mortality and Incidence in the Principal Infections of Childhood." This was published in the Proceedings of the Royal Society of Medicine, the Archives of Disease in Childhood, and the Monthly Bulletin of the Ministry of Health and Public Health Laboratory Service. He also wrote a book 'Epidemic Diseases' which was published by Pelican Books.

He was a frequent contributor to the Monthly Bulletin of the Ministry of Health and Public Health Laboratory Service on other subjects. In 1947 and in 1949, with Dr. W. H. Bradley, he arranged two nation-wide hospital inquiries on poliomyelitis. The reports of the findings which are of outstanding importance in the history of poliomyelitis in this country. In 1949, with B. Benjamin, he wrote on the age-distribution changes shown in poliomyelitis in England and Wales.

Other subjects which he ably illuminated included children's deaths

from violence and the causes of severe deafness in children. In an article published in the BMJ he summed up the pros and cons of tonsillectomy.

Following Gale's death, Professor R. Milnes Walker³, who sat on committees with him, recalled: "In 1950 Dr. Gale accepted the newly designated office of Director of Postgraduate Medical Studies in the University of Bristol, together with the Lectureship in Epidemiology. He was also Honorary Consultant in Epidemiology to the United Bristol Hospitals. This double appointment brought him into contact with the medical services from Gloucester to Land's End, but following the introduction of the pre-registration house appointments, part of his time was occupied in seeing that graduates of Bristol University found suitable resident posts. As a member of the joint Registrar Appointments Committee he was responsible for the interchange of registrars between the teaching hospital and the hospitals under the regional board. He also initiated the postgraduate courses in Bristol and the region. The thorough yet gentle way in which he set about his tasks and his solution of problems, often in the face of conflicting interests, led to a confidence in his guidance which was shared by all who worked with him. He would take endless trouble in seeing that all points of view were considered and that every claim received just treatment. In this way he formed an important link between the university, the board of governors, and the regional board, and he enhanced the happy relations which existed between them. During his last year he had had poor health, but he was always happiest when at work and was just getting into his stride again when the last illness burst suddenly upon him. He was a man who sought nothing for himself and was always ready to help others; his colleagues in Bristol will miss him, as the work which he was



West of England Medical Journal

Formerly Bristol Medico-Chirurgical Journal

WEMJ Volume 114 No. 4 Article 4 December 2015



The e-journal of the
Bristol Medico-Chirurgical Society

Who was Dr Arthur Harold Gale and why is a memorial lecture named after him?

doing so ably will have to continue; he has been responsible for making it an essential part of the medical services of the country”.

The College of General Practitioners⁴, founded in 1952, instituted the first named lecture, the James Mackenzie Lecture, in 1954. Sir Denis Pereira Gray⁵, a past Chairman and President of the college, described the reasons to have such a named lecture. “Principally the effect both of keeping the memory of the person alive, whilst at the same time honouring someone of a new generation, the lecturer. It can also provide a valuable focus for an event and help to hold the members of an organisation together by uniting them around a set of shared values (“a community of practice”). Also it publicly valued research, reminding the whole membership that as far back as the 1890’s, James Mackenzie, a British general practitioner, was publishing world class research”.

The college was made up of regional faculties. Many of these faculties started to develop their own lectures and awards. The first of these was the Gale Memorial Lecture of the South West Faculty (now the Severn Faculty) in 1957. Other faculties followed after the deaths of many distinguished early members of the College e.g. McConaghey (Tamar 1980), George Swift (Wessex 1982), Harvard Davis (Wales 1986), Robin Pinsent (Midlands 1992) and John Lawson (Scotland) lectures.

In 1955, the South Western Faculty of the newly formed College of General Practitioners was founded. Arthur Gale was immediately co-opted as a member of the Faculty Board. His personality and learning impressed many doctors. He was a good friend to the South Western local RCGP Faculty who decided, following his death, to institute an annual memorial lecture in his name - the Gale Memorial Lecture.

The First Gale Memorial Lecture, ‘Opportunities and Pitfalls of General Practitioner Research’ was given by Dr

Robert E. Hope Simpson, a Cirencester GP and researcher, exactly a calendar year after Arthur Gale’s death at the early age of 55. Hope Simpson knew Arthur Gale and was able to speak with some authority about the man and his achievements. He related in his lecture that “despite the administrative and social demands of his new post in Bristol, his epidemiological interest especially in poliomyelitis was undiminished, and he had constantly in mind that point at which history, geography and medicine meet. He was always aware that the facts were struggling to speak to him. Something important and obvious about the epidemiology of infantile paralysis was being held up to us, and our dull eyes were missing its meaning. This is illustrated in one of his papers on poliomyelitis:”

‘I can find no evidence that there was an identifiable importation of an epidemic strain of virus at any time. It is true that ports figure largely in the early history as they did between the wars, but they were such odd ports for an importation theory. I should have thought the most likely ports for importation in the early years would be those trafficking with Scandinavia and the United States and not Bristol, Barrow-in-Furness or Weymouth. If the epidemic strain arrives at ports why does Leicestershire come into the picture so early?’

Hope Simpson continued: “Why? Why? Why? Gale’s mind used to become preoccupied with such questions so that they penetrated into his daily life. He lived with them. In 1947 he was fascinated by the history of polio in Cornwall. Nearly ten years later he was still preoccupied with the same problem. This sensitivity to problems is the hallmark of a certain type of investigator, and Cajal⁶ goes so far as to infer that you are unlikely to do useful research unless your problems get under your clothes like the itch and stay with you and worry you night and day. Gale often became abstracted and withdrawn. The quotation from his paper continues:

‘I find the problem of recurrence of poliomyelitis fascinating but irritating. One feels there must be some simple and obvious explanation.’

We in this faculty are going to miss this quiet, gentle, thoughtful friend and nowhere more than in our research activities. Gale would have approved the subject we are to consider tonight: *The Opportunities and Pitfalls peculiar to research in general practice*. He had our opportunities in mind when he wrote of a problem unanswered by a hospital investigation. “The question is difficult to answer by an experiment on outpatients.””

The Gale Memorial Lecture has been given by many distinguished people: Sir George Godber (1978), Dr Denis Pereira Gray (1979), Prof Rudolf Klein (1985), Dr Julian Tudor Hart (1988), William Waldegrave MP (1991), Dr Iona Heath (2007) and Dr Sarah Wollaston MP (2015). Many, like the first, by Hope Simpson, have been published in the British Journal of General Practice: “Epidemiology: Some past and present considerations” (Prof A V Neale)⁷, “Survival” (Surg Rear-Admiral Dr Stanley Miles)⁸, “On the boundary” (Dr Marshall Marinker)⁹, “It is the men that make the city” (Sir George Godber)¹⁰ and “Just a GP” (Dr Denis Pereira Gray)¹¹.

Arthur Gale was a man with vision who recognised the importance of epidemiology, postgraduate education and the vital role of the general practitioner. That is why he has been honoured by the RCGP Severn Faculty with an annual eponymous memorial lecture

REFERENCES AND NOTES:

1. Obituary BMJ 27 October 1956 1001
2. The First Gale Memorial Lecture J. Coll. Gen. Pract., 1958, 1, 225-45
3. Prof Milnes Walker Obituary BMJ 27 October 1956 1001
4. The college gained the title Royal in 1972 when it received the Royal Charter
5. Forty Years On. RCGP. 1992 81
6. Santiago Ramón y Cajal was a Spanish pathologist, histologist, neuroscientist and Nobel laureate. His original pioneering investigations of the microscopic structure of the brain have led to him being designated by many, as the father of modern neuroscience
7. J. Coll. Gen. Pract., 1961, 4, 19-45
8. J. Roy. Coll. Gen. Pract., 1971, 21, 61
9. J. Roy. Coll. Gen. Pract., 1973, 23, 83-94
10. J. Roy. Coll. Gen. Pract., 1979, 29, 216-227.
11. J. Roy. Coll. Gen Pract., 1980, 30, 231-39