

MAUDE ABBOTT: EARLY FEMALE PATHOLOGIST AND FOUNDER OF THE INTERNATIONAL ACADEMY OF PATHOLOGY

Maude Elizabeth Seymour Abbot (1869-1940) was one of Canada's earliest female physicians who became an expert on congenital heart disease. During her career, she had to overcome many obstacles. She was born Maude Babin in a small town in western Quebec, St. Andrew's East, in 1869. After her mother died of tuberculosis and her father left, her maternal grandmother, Mrs. William Abbot, took over the rearing of Maude and her older sister, Alice, legally adopted them, and changed their surname to her own.

With the nurturing of her grandmother, Maude Abbott was able to attend McGill University where she became one of the first women to receive a bachelor of arts degree. Maude then decided to pursue a degree in medicine. However, after she was refused admission to McGill Medical School, she matriculated at Bishop's College, a smaller university with a medical school in Montreal, from which she received her medical degree with several honors in 1894. This was the beginning of a complicated relationship with McGill University over the years.

Following postgraduate studies in Europe, Maude Abbott returned to Montreal where she came under the influence of the Chair of Pathology at McGill, Dr. George Adami. Adami became so impressed with her capabilities, including her analysis of a case of hemochromatosis, that he appointed her Assistant Curator of the McGill Medical Museum in 1898. She subsequently took full charge of the Museum in 1901. She became focused on cataloguing its collection. This led her to a systematic study of congenital heart disease linking structure and function. In a show of leadership, Maude Abbot founded and ran the Association of Medical Museums.

In preparation of her assignment to create order out of the chaotic state of the McGill Medical Museum, Dr. Adami suggested to Abbott that she visit museums at major teaching centers. During her trip in 1898, she met Sir William Osler, who stimulated her to take a special interest in the museum. In 1901, she published an article on a specimen known as the Holmes heart which carried the label of "ulcerative endocarditis" and had a single left-sided ventricle. The case report

published in the *Montreal Medical Journal* was a milestone in developing her lifelong interest in congenital heart disease.

Dr. Abbott developed a classification scheme for specimens in the museum based on the work of Osler, and she called this approach the Osler Catalogue. Osler in turn invited her to publish a chapter on congenital heart disease in the 1908 edition of *Principles and Practice of Medicine*. Dr. Abbott continued to add to the formal collection building it to a tally of over 1000 cases. Dr. Abbott also became recognized as an increasingly popular teacher of medical students.

A change in leadership and a reorganization of the Pathology Department in 1918 created significant problems for Abbott. The museum was transferred to a new Pathology Institute building in 1918 and the operations were effectively taken over by the new chairman, Horst Oertel. This effective demotion and her goal of obtaining a better salary led Abbott to move to the Woman's College of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia from 1923 to 1925 where she was professor of pathology and bacteriology. However, her residual warm feeling for McGill and Montreal, in spite of how she had been treated, led her to accept a position as assistant professor of research medicine and curator of a new Central Medical Museum, without formal teaching assignments. Abbott remained in charge of this museum until her retirement in 1936. The retirement was forced and she was denied the title of Emeritus.

In 1936, Maude Abbott published her seminal work, *The Atlas of Congenital Cardiac Disease*, published by the American Heart Association. In addition to her work at McGill, she became internationally known and respected for her activity as secretary-treasurer of the International Association of Medical Museums, which she had co-founded in 1906 with James Carroll of the Army Medical Museum in Washington, DC and John McCallum of the Johns Hopkins Hospital. She held the position until her death in 1940. The International Association of Medical Museums was the direct predecessor of the contemporary International Academy of Pathology.

Dr. Maude Abbott is genuinely recognized as a person of great character who persisted in overcoming discrimination to make lasting contributions to pathology in medicine. Through most of her professional career she was the primary

provider for her older sister, Alice, who had significant mental illness. The Abbott archive provides documentation that it was far more difficult for a woman doctor in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to make a sharp differentiation between public and private life than it was for professional men.

Although Maude Abbott became internationally famous for her work in cardiovascular disease, she was persistently denied recognition and promotion at home. Ironically, McGill University, having denied Abbott admission to the medical school, subsequently awarded her two honorary degrees, the first in 1910 in medicine (although women was still not admitted to the medical school until 1918) and the second an L.L.D. in 1939. Apparently the concern for setting precedent trumped the academic recognition of her outstanding accomplishments. In 1924, she helped to found the Federation of Medical Women of Canada, an organization dedicated to the professional, social and personal advancement of women physicians. She was posthumously inducted into the Canadian Medical Hall of Fame in 1994. Also in 1994, she was named a “Historic Person” by the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada, and was belatedly recognized by McGill University with a plaque placed outside the McIntyre Medical Sciences Building. In 2000, Canada Post issued a forty-six cent postage stamp in her honor, entitled *The Heart of the Matter*.

A reprint of *The Atlas of Congenital Cardiac Disease* was published by McGill-Queen’s University Press in 2006 in commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the founding of the International Academy of Pathology. This magnificent work is noteworthy for presenting a systematic approach to the pathological anatomy of congenital heart disease, and it has served to inform and stimulate the subsequent work of cardiologists and surgeons in the field.

Every year, we justly remember Dr. Maude Abbott when we attend the Maude Abbott Lecture, which is the most prestigious named lecture of the US and Canadian Academy of Pathology (USCAP), a division of the International Academy of Pathology (IAP).

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