Shaping Plastic Surgery in British Columbia—The Courtemanche Legacy

Façonner la chirurgie plastique en Colombie-Britannique : le legs de Courtemanche

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Abstract

Dr Albert Douglas Courtemanche was born in Gravenhurst, Ontario on November 16, 1929. In 1949, he was accepted to the University of Toronto Medical School, graduating in 1955. After completing his internship at the Toronto General Hospital and at the Hospital for Sick Children, he completed his surgical training in Vancouver and in the United Kingdom. When Dr Courtemanche returned from his training in 1962, he joined Dr Cowan on the surgical staff at the Vancouver General Hospital. He was responsible for establishing a new plastic surgery ward, a dedicated operating room (OR), an integrated burn unit and also starting the UBC plastic surgery training program. Dr Courtemanche became involved in working with the Royal College, first as an examiner and then as the Chairman of the Plastic Surgery Exam Board in 1981. He eventually became the first and only plastic surgeon to ever hold the position as President of the Royal College. Dr Courtemanche emphasized throughout his career the importance of teaching and role modeling. A very proud moment in Dr Courtemanche's career was when his son Douglas became a pediatric plastic surgeon. After retiring Dr Courtemanche became a volunteer at the VanDusen Botanical Garden and completed their Master Gardeners Program.

Résumé

Le docteur Albert Douglas Courtemanche est né à Gravenhurst, en Ontario, le 16 novembre 1929. En 1949, il est accepté à l'école de médecine de l'Université de Toronto, où il est promu en 1955. Après avoir terminé son internat au *Toronto General Hospital* et au *Hospital for Sick Children*, il se spécialise en chirurgie à Vancouver et au Royaume-Uni. À son retour en 1962, il complète l'unité de chirurgie du *Vancouver General Hospital* avec le docteur Cowan. Il met sur pied un nouveau service de chirurgie plastique, une salle d'opération réservée, une unité intégrée des grands brûlés et le programme de formation en chirurgie plastique de l'université de la Colombie-Britannique. Le docteur Courtemanche s'investit au sein du Collège royal, d'abord comme examinateur, puis comme président du comité d'examen en chirurgie plastique en 1981. Il devient enfin le premier et le seul chirurgien plasticien à occuper la présidence du Collège royal. Tout au long de sa carrière, le docteur Courtemanche a souligné l'importance de l'enseignement et de la formation par l'exemple. Il a d'ailleurs ressenti une grande fierté lorsque son fils Douglas est devenu chirurgien plasticien en pédiatrie. Après avoir pris sa retraite, le docteur Courtemanche est devenu bénévole au jardin botanique VanDusen, où il a suivi le programme de maître jardinier.

Keywords

history, plastic surgery, medical education, internship and residency, interview

Formative Years and Influences

Dr Albert Douglas Courtemanche was born on November 16, 1929, in Gravenhurst, a small town on Lake Muskoka in Ontario. As a child, Dr Courtemanche often found himself in need of first aid due to his active lifestyle while playing with children in the neighborhood. His first encounters with

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Figure 1. Dr A. D. Courtemanche with Dr R. J. Cowan in June 1992.

medicine were due to these incidents. There was a general practitioner who lived nearby that role modeled what a physician ought to be. The doctor was a very kind gentleman who Dr Courtemanche hoped to 1 day emulate. Dr Courtemanche received an excellent educational grounding at a private school in Port Credit before completing his grade 13 at Lawrence Park Collegiate. He was then accepted to the University of Toronto Medical School, graduating with a MD in 1955.¹

Dr Courtemanche worked his way through medical school with his wife Anne, who he married at age 20. Between them, they were able to meet both tuition fees and living expenses. He completed his internship at the Toronto General Hospital and the Hospital for Sick Children. While on the plastic surgery service, he met Drs A. W. Farmer and Bill Lindsay. They both impressed him with the work they were doing and the integrity of their character, fostering a keen interest in the specialty. Dr Courtemanche applied and was accepted to the Toronto surgery program. It was agreed that he could take his first year at Shaughnessy Hospital in Vancouver. While in BC, he had the opportunity to work with Drs Bob Langston and Bob Cowan, both of whom encouraged his pursuit of plastic surgery training.

In order to develop his interest, he stayed in Vancouver for a further year of clinical work and tendon healing research under Dr Cowan's guidance (Figure 1). Both Drs Langston and Cowan felt that the United Kingdom afforded better training facilities in plastic surgery due to experiences in the per-war period. An opportunity presented itself in Edinburgh, where Dr Courtemanche was offered a position as a plastic surgery house officer at the Bangour unit located on the

Edinburgh-Glasgow Highway. This was a busy trauma hospital with 90 beds for plastic surgery run by Mr A. B. Wallace, who was the chief.

Dr Courtemanche then spent 6 months at Great Ormond Street in London doing pediatric plastic surgery. He regarded the institution as one of the most collegial programs he had ever worked at. Here, he learned not only surgical skills but also the acumen required to be a good clinical surgeon with sound decision-making preoperatively. His final year in the United Kingdom was as Senior Registrar at Stoke Mandeville Hospital, a 90-bed unit, which included the Nuffield Burn Unit. While there, he received a letter from Dr Cowan suggesting it was time to come home to Vancouver.

Dr Courtemanche's reflects on early life, formative years and training—in Supplemental CLIP 1.

Development of Plastic Surgery in British Columbia

Dr Bob Langston first worked as a general practitioner surgeon in Alberta. In 1939, he and his anesthesiologist wife Kay set sail for Britain. While they were at sea, war broke out in Europe and Dr Langston was conscripted to work in Edinburgh. There, he met Sir Harold Gillies who convinced him and his wife, to work with him in Rookdown House, Basingstoke, where Gillies had established a military plastic surgery service.² Dr Langston gained a foundation in plastic surgery, particularly in burn treatment during this time. He returned to Canada in October 1944 as British Columbia's first plastic surgeon. The federal government was setting up special plastic surgery units to treat Canadian

servicemen injured in the war who required reconstructive surgery. The decision was made to establish 2 military plastic surgery units—one in Montreal and the other in Vancouver at the Shaughnessy Hospital that would be run by Dr Langston.²

Dr Bob Cowan was the second plastic surgeon in BC starting his practice in December 1949, working briefly with Dr Langston before gaining further training at Great Ormond Street.² Drs Langston and Cowan formed a partnership in Vancouver. Because of inadequate resources at the Vancouver General Hospital, Dr Cowan was forced to work in a number of hospitals across the Greater Vancouver Regional District in order to accommodate his practice. They had quite different personalities but both were skilled surgeons, hardworking, industrious, and innovative. Dr Langston was a do it yourself, often completing large renovations and landscaping projects at his old Vancouver home independently. Dr Cowan was a surgeon who demanded a lot of himself, showing a passion for complex operations, such as head and neck reconstructive surgery for laryngo-pharyngo-esophagectomies.

When Dr Courtemanche returned from his training in 1962, he joined Dr Cowan at the Vancouver General Hospital. The plastic surgeons provided a trauma and burn service primarily with their patients typically admitted under other departments. Being on call on alternate weeks they tended to operate in the evenings due to a lack of hospital resources and often did a number of cases consecutively at night. They often caught a quick nap when they could, sometimes on a stretcher. Dr Cowan worked like that for 10 years but became increasingly frustrated with the situation. Dr Cowan tasked young Dr Courtemanche to advocate for more resources. Over the next 5 years, Dr Courtemanche was able to establish a new plastic surgery ward, a dedicated OR, and an integrated burn unit.

Dr Courtemanche reflecting on the developing years of plastic surgery in British Columbia—in Supplemental CLIP 2.

The Royal College

Dr Courtemanche always “did his homework” through methodical preparation for meetings. He set out to collect as many facts regarding the public service need for residents to necessitate a plastic surgery training program in British Columbia. There was an undeniable need for more resources and UBC had all the necessary prerequisites including a dedicated unit, faculty teachers, operating time, and an integrated burn unit. With this information clearly presented, the Royal College approved the application right away. The program increased the number of surgeons in the province, provided necessary service to areas outside Vancouver.

Dr Courtemanche extended his role with the Royal College, first as an examiner and subsequently as Chairman of the Plastic Surgery Exam Board in 1981. While in this role, he was approached by colleagues who suggested he run as local representative in the next election. He did so and was elected to the Royal College Council for 2 terms of 4 years each, the second of which being as Vice President of Surgery. A few years later, he received a call from Ottawa asking if he would be the next

Figure 2. Dr A. D. Courtemanche with his sons Douglas and David skiing at Sunshine Village in February 1970.

president of the college in 1992, the first and only plastic surgeon to ever hold that position. It was a demanding role that came with significant honor but also sacrifice. A busy solo surgical practice was not compatible with frequent trips around the world, although he did continue as postgraduate dean in the Faculty of Medicine. During his tenure as president, the major interest was in assessing training programs and how to appropriately review them.³ He traveled the world representing the college and met with many influential people, all with the same goal of improving post graduate medical education. Some would say that the image of the specialty of plastic surgery benefited from his position as president of the college.

Dr Courtemanche recounts his time with the Royal College—in Supplemental CLIP 3.

Role Modeling and Family Life

Dr Courtemanche emphasized the importance of teaching and a role modeling throughout his career.⁴ Dr Douglas Courtemanche Jr remembers how his father would often have the residents over at the family home and even have them participate as crew for local sailing races. Douglas was therefore exposed to the training

Figure 3. Drs A. D. and Douglas Courtemanche at Royal College Convocation in October 1993.

program professionally at a young age but also personally became friends with residents. It is therefore not unexpected that Dr Courtemanche had a significant influence on his son Douglas following in his footsteps in pediatric plastic surgery. His father was the most important mentor he had.

Dr Courtemanche was similar to Dr Langston in that he did all the renovations around the house, often working with his children as assistants (Figure 2). Dr Courtemanche Jr remembers being in the OR as a junior resident with his dad and the chief resident when he was demonstrating how to use a mallet for an osteotomy: "Hold it like this, let the hammer, let the instruments do the work." Dr Courtemanche Jr remembers hearing this when he was 6 years old, repairing things around the house.

Dr Courtemanche was incredibly proud of his son for pursuing pediatric plastic surgery because that's what he loved doing most (Figure 3). Seeing the results from meticulous surgery over long relationships with patients brought incredible satisfaction. Knowing his patients would benefit from continued care provided by his son was an added benefit in what has become the Courtemanche dynasty.

Dr Courtemanche describes the special relationship he had with his family and his son Dr Douglas Courtemanche—in Supplemental CLIP 4.

Authors' Note

Y.S. prepared the manuscript, conducted the interviews, and completed background research. S.F.M. organized the interviews, provided background information, contributed to the manuscript, and is

the Historian of the Canadian Society of Plastic Surgeons. Permission from individuals featured in this publication was obtained. No patient data or identifying patient information is reported. The information presented in this article is primarily based on a personal interview with Dr AD Courtemanche and his son Dr Douglas Courtemanche. The interview is part of the larger history project currently being conducted by the Canadian Society of Plastic Surgeons. Information was corroborated by other sources to ensure the accuracy of the article. To see the full text transcription of the video interview please access supplemental material online.

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Supplemental Material

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