

DAVIES, HUGH MORRISTON (1879 - 1965), probably the most outstanding pioneer of thoracic surgery in Britain

Name: Hugh Morrision Davies
Date of birth: 1879
Date of death: 1965
Spouse: Dorothy Lilian Davies (née Courtney)
Parent: William Davies
Gender: Male
Occupation: outstanding pioneer of thoracic surgery in Britain
Area of activity: Medicine
Author: Emyr Wyn Jones

Born 10 August 1879, the son of Swansea-born Dr. William Davies, a general practitioner at Huntingdon. Educated at Winchester and Trinity College, Cambridge, and University College Hospital, London, he obtained his initial qualifications in 1903, after being awarded some of the most prestigious prizes at the Medical School. He secured the degrees of M.Ch. and M.D. of Cambridge in 1907, the F.R.C.S. in 1908 and he was appointed assistant surgeon of the hospital the following year. After some fundamental research on nerve regeneration Davies turned his attention to radiological studies of diseases of the chest, and a visit to Berlin in 1910 awakened his interest in thoracic surgery. Two years later he was the first surgeon to diagnose a lung tumour by X-Rays, and he successfully removed it. There soon followed many new and progressive features of great therapeutic merit. The stage was set for a career of remarkable and even unique achievement. In January 1916 when operating on a diseased chest he had the calamitous misfortune to infect his own right hand. The infection was particularly virulent and his life was in grave danger. Some of the most eminent medical men in London urged him to have the arm amputated. Davies refused. After extensive surgery his life was spared but the end-result was a clenched, distorted and useless hand, and fixation of the wrist and elbow. It was sadly evident that a meteoric career had been extinguished at the age of 37, and his retirement from the surgical staff of University College Hospital was inevitable.

The hospital offered him the post of radiologist, but in 1918 Davies, revealing enormous courage, decided to buy Llanbedr Hall Sanatorium, near Ruthin, where he could treat patients under his own direct supervision. The following year he published the first textbook in the English language on thoracic surgery. He discovered that many of his patients needed surgical treatment, and by a supreme effort of determination and perseverance he educated his left hand and the crippled right hand so that he could embark on major surgery of the chest once again. Within a few years Llanbedr Hall became a centre that was attracting world-wide attention. Davies was appointed thoracic surgeon to all the chest hospitals in Wales, and eventually his clinical responsibilities extended to Lancashire and Cheshire. His reputation was due to the fact that he uniquely embodied personally the wisdom and balance of a physician and the manual dexterity and innovative skill of a surgeon, combined with an unequalled experience in radiological interpretation. As a result of this impressive aggregation of talent his books and other publications were regarded as authoritative.

The outbreak of World War II added enormously to his responsibilities. He established the North West Thoracic Surgical Services at Broadgreen Hospital, Liverpool, and became its Director. Davies's clinical teaching and administrative guidance were of crucial significance, and of equal importance was his success in training a group of able young surgeons to follow him. His attachment to the Broadgreen Centre continued, in an advisory capacity, until he reached the age of eighty, and then he finally retired to his cottage at Llanarmon-yn-lâl, where he continued to tend his garden in spite of increasing physical disability.

For over fifty years the value of his work was warmly recognised by his colleagues, and there was formal academic recognition as well. The University of Liverpool conferred upon him in 1943 the honorary Mastership in Surgery - Ch.M.; in 1954 he was awarded the Weber-Parke Prize of the Royal College of Physicians; in 1961 he received a LL.D. from the University of Wales.

Davies was a man of small physique, with a bent frame and his head on one side. He looked almost frail and had a soft high-pitched voice, and yet he had tremendous energy and courage, and an inexhaustible capacity for hard work. He loved books, painting and music, and had an abiding affection for big, powerful and fast cars. He was a great and loveable man.

He married Dorothy Lilian (died 15 October 1966 aged 88), daughter of Dr. W.L. Courtney, and they had two daughters. He died at Llanarmon-yn-lâl on 4 February 1965.

Author

Emyr Wyn Jones, (1907 - 1999)

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