

Mr. Herbert Eckstein

- As I Knew Him

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In February 1965, I was selected by Mr HB Eckstein and Mr DM Forrest as their surgical registrar at Queen Mary's Hospital Carshalton, Surrey. This was my first break in Paediatric Surgery and owe a life long gratitude to them for having selected me. Opportunities for training in Paediatric surgery in Britain at that time were very limited. Queen Mary's was the referral centre for neonatal surgery for a wide area in the south of England. There were no fulltime Paediatric surgeons even as far south as Southampton or Brighton and thus the case load at Carshalton was quite large. Mr Eckstein was concentrating his main interest at Queen Mary's with a few sessions at the Hospital for Sick Children, London.

We had a well planned neonatal surgical ward with twenty cubicles and the sister in charge was with Miss Coulbourne who had been trained at GOS and fully committed to neonates. We had two other surgical wards for older children that also admitted patients under the care of two Orthopaedic surgeons, two ENT surgeons and an Ophthalmologist. The neonatal referral was considerable and although myelomeningoceles constituted about half the neonatal referral, a variety of other neonatal surgical conditions were also referred. Both Mr Eckstein and Mr Forrest were always available for neonatal and other emergency operations and Mrs Margaret Manford the Consultant Anaesthetist was at our door step anytime, even late at night.

When I started work, Mr Eckstein made two statements that left a life long impression in me. Firstly one cannot learn neonatal surgery by being available only on call days. I was the only surgical registrar and had alternate day cover from the Orthopaedic registrar. But Mr Eckstein wanted me to be available for neonates everyday. This gave me wonderful experience to assist him in neonatal operations. Secondly he said that surgical skills alone is not going to improve my career prospects and wanted me to write papers. These were obviously his personal experience that made him what he was.

Mr Eckstein was quiet, soft spoken but had a persuasive personality, able to get the support of all those who worked with him, be it the anaesthetists, Dr Mrs Manford, Dr Mrs McLean, Radiologist (Dr BCH Ward), Pathologist (Dr Erdohazi), Microbiologist (Dr Newman), Clinical Biochemist (Dr Stern) and the nursing staff in the wards and operating theatre. Dr David Lawson was Paediatrician as well as the Medical Superintendent of the hospital and also totally dedicated to the hospital. There was never a time I found it difficult to contact Mr Eckstein for advice nor get him to hospital to operate on emergency cases. Ward rounds always started in the neonatal ward and then went on to see the older children, and finally to meet the Physiotherapy Department and see how the older patients with spina bifida were progressing. The weekly meeting to review x-rays at the Radiology Department with Dr Ward were educational and instructive in interpersonal relationship. Ward rounds were done without anxiety or fear of the chief and if I had a difficult postoperative problem he showed concern and always had the right advice.

While operating he would always comment on techniques of Sir Denis Browne and his dear friend Mr HH Nixon which he had incorporated in his operative procedures. His interest in paediatric urology was inspired by

Sir David Innes Williams. He knew all their finer techniques but had developed his own excellent style of operating, emphasizing every important technical detail as he went on with the operation. Once an operation was repeatedly done by him, he would get me to do it. I can remember my first ileal conduit which he got me to do and he sat patiently in the operating theatre sister's office (sister Ling). He said that I can always call him for help but if he assisted me then he would only get into my way and cramp my operating style. Despite doing a number of major operations he would emphasize that it is the simple operation like a herniotomy or orchidopexy done properly that is most satisfying to the patient and family.

I was for a while living away from the hospital with my wife and baby daughter since no married accommodation was available. This involved frequent travelling for calls and when my wife was expecting our next baby I was concerned about having to help my wife and also travel to hospital at odd hours for emergency work. When I mentioned this to him, in his soft spoken friendly manner he said that he will see what could be done. He found out that a house in the hospital premises allocated to the resident engineer would fall vacant and was able to persuade the administration to give it to me. This made a world of difference to me and my wife. This is one example of his concern for others.

The staff at Carshalton loved him because they could talk to him on any problem. Work was his greatest love and he loved children. He could inspire confidence and allay fear in the most frightened child. We all learned from him but to him it came natural. In the operating theatre he never lost his cool and it was a pleasure assisting him. I cannot recall a harsh word or critical comment on others.

He was very interested in Paediatric Urology although his publications had a very wide range from reviews on omphalocele, hydrocephalus, intestinal atresia and spina bifida. He encouraged others to publish and during my time there are some very good papers from Carshalton that were inspired by Mr Eckstein. The Pathologist Dr Erdohazi reviewed the lungs at autopsy of children that had operations for hydrocephalus and was one of the first to report pulmonary microvascular changes in children with venticulo-right atrial shunts for hydrocephalus. This was the current operation at that time and the findings reported in this paper prompted a relook at this operation and its long term effects. I can recollect going with him regularly to discuss with Dr Erdohazi the material for the paper.

Ventriculitis from infected shunts was another major problem that concerned him. Dr RL Newman (d. 1972), the medical microbiologist was the earliest to report the use of intra-ventricular Gentamycin in the treatment and was an idea that Mr Eckstein conceived and passed on to his colleague for bacteriological evaluation and never took any credit.

The BAPS meeting in 1966 was held in London and Mr Eckstein was keen that a half day meeting should be held at Queen Mary's which would however require all the delegates from London to be transported to Queen Mary's. Fortunately Mr Forrest was the secretary for this meeting and he was able to work with Mr Eckstein and make this satellite meeting a great success. It was a great day at Carshalton on this occasion. In 1966 Mr Eckstein got a grant from the Spina Bifida Foundation to employ a fulltime research fellow with surgical experience to review the problems of bladder function in children with spina bifida. We had a number of children that were in need of review. Mr DGW Cooper was selected for this who published his studies for a (MD) thesis. I doubt if Mr Eckstein took any credit. This was Mr Eckstein all the way.

After about one and the half years with him, he told me that I must go to Liverpool since I have been taught all I need to know about Paediatric Surgery as practised in London. He contacted Mr Peter Rickham and Mr Herbert Johnston and I was appointed Senior Registrar at Alder Hey. This was indeed wonderful for me. There were at that time only four senior registrar post in Paediatric Surgery in UK, three at GOS and one in Liverpool and thus the competition was fierce to say the least. I left UK rather prematurely in 1967 and came to Kuala Lumpur to join the first medical school in Malaysia and start Paediatric surgery in Malaysia but all along kept in touch with him.

My younger brother Dr AK Somasundaram came over to UK in 1970 and I wrote to Mr Eckstein to help him. He took my brother into his staff and made sure that he got a good training. In the XIXth BAPS Annual Meeting in Glasgow in 1972 Mr Eckstein presented a paper on anterior approach for repair of bilateral hydronephrosis on which he included my late brother as his co-author.

I kept asking him for more help in training Malaysian Paediatric Surgeons. Datuk Dr Mahmood Nor who is currently the senior surgeon in the Ministry of Health and Head of the Paediatric Institute at Kuala Lumpur and Mr Zulkifli Laidin who is a paediatric surgeon in Kuala Lumpur are two of his trainees. These fond memories of Mr Eckstein are very much cherished by me and I am extremely happy to record them. He was one of a kind and a special and dear one to me.

To my dear friend Herbert,
from whom I learned a lot.
with many thanks
Jos de Vries

Dr. Jos deVries' dedication on the inauguration of the Pediatric Urology Center in Nijmegen, 1982