

Dentistry at McGill — The First 100 Years

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In September 2004, Montreal's 2 faculties of dentistry — at McGill University and the University of Montreal — will each celebrate their 100th anniversary at their respective institutions.

Both faculties can trace their origins back to the Dental College of the Province of Quebec — Canada's second dental school founded in 1892. The bilingual college, a small, Montreal-based professional school, became part of the faculty of medicine at Bishop's University. In 1904, after the faculty's dean passed away, the English- and French-language medical and dental students and staff were divided between 2 institutions. The English-speaking group was absorbed by the faculty of medicine at McGill, while the French-language group joined the Montreal campus of what was then the faculty of medicine of Laval University.

So it is appropriate that both institutions are sharing in the centennial celebrations. As well as hosting various galas and parties, the 2 faculties are holding a joint research symposium on September 17 and 18 entitled "New Oral Health Knowledge for the 21st Century."

Subjects to be presented at the symposium include biomineralization, how bone cells control their environment, new ways to rebuild salivary glands and oral tissues, the challenges of poverty and dental health, how the mind can alter pain, new insights into trigeminal neuralgia and other neuropathies, some new observations about visceral pain and the experiences of local dentists in a dental research network.

Following the symposium, McGill will present the Ernie Ambrose Homecoming lecture on October 15. The well-loved former dean will be the special guest at the lecture, which takes place the night before the Centennial Gala Dinner and Dance.

The McGill celebrations almost didn't happen.

On July 17, 1991, McGill suddenly announced that it would be closing down the faculty of dentistry. Principal David Johnston told all teaching staff that dentistry did not fit with McGill's long-term plans of becoming a major research institution with a high proportion of graduate students. He said McGill had decided the faculty should stop accepting new students as it would close its doors in

1996 to help cut the university's \$79.5 million debt.

Despite the fact that McGill had been producing some of the best clinically trained dentists in the country, Mr. Johnston said dentistry was just too expensive. In his opinion, dentistry professors were not doing enough research, the faculty was not offering enough graduate programs and the facilities of the school were inadequate. He also noted that it cost the university more to teach dental students than any other students on campus.

McGill dentists took the principal's words as a challenge.

To save the school, an ambitious Renewal Campaign was created. Staff, students, alumni and their patients, as well as a number of friends of the faculty (both from within and outside the university), rallied to prevent the closure of the school. By September of that year, McGill came back with a proposal: the faculty could remain open if it met several conditions within one year.

Among other criteria, the proportion of research-oriented teaching staff had to expand and external research funding had to be raised. The dental clinic at the Montreal General Hospital would have to become self-financing and find the \$1.6 million necessary to upgrade equipment. By the one-year deadline, all conditions had been met and the Renewal Campaign had raised \$1.9 million in private funds!

This campaign didn't just save the faculty. It changed it.

Dentistry research now generates as much research funding per professor for McGill as medicine. In every case, the faculty's research is linked to other faculties and departments in the greater McGill community.

"We're small, with some specific areas that our research is focused on," dean James Lund said in an interview. "But we're among the best in the world at what we do." He added that the faculty's challenge now is to find space to grow and ways of "increasing our resources so that can happen."

Students now graduate as Doctors of Dental Medicine (DMD), a degree that emphasizes the link between medicine and dentistry, not only in 2 years of common training but also in practice.



Faculty of dentistry class of 1931 on a tour of Dawe's Brewery.

Through its expanded outreach program, the faculty also gives back much more to the surrounding community.

While some things have changed, others remain the same. McGill still produces some of the best clinically trained

professionals on the continent. McGill graduates realize just how skilled they are while doing their post-graduate training in other locations.

Alumni are still deeply attached to their alma mater. Thanks in part to the Renewal Campaign, they also seem to have acquired a greater sense of ownership in their school. A great example of this loyalty is the alumni-generated program to endow the faculty with McGill's first clinical professorship in honour of Dr. Ambrose.

A quote from McGill's 1906 student yearbook explains how it all began.

"In the autumn of 1903, the Dental Association of the Province of Quebec approached the University with a request for the formation of a Dental Department in connection with the Faculty of Medicine, and as a result of the negotiations which took place during that autumn and winter, the Dental Department of McGill was opened in the autumn of 1904 as a section of the Medical Faculty. The first two years' work is the same as that of students who intend to study Medicine proper, while the third and fourth years are devoted to the study of Dental work and the degree obtained is a MDS (Master in Dental Surgery). At present, there are about 12 students in the Department."

In 1908, the MDS degree was changed to a Doctor in Dental Science. In 1917, McGill decided to award the degree of Doctor of Dental Surgery — the degree offered at the time by Dalhousie University, Laval University and the

University of Toronto.

Like all dental schools at the time, McGill was dependent on practising professionals to act as teachers and mentors. Dr. Peter Brown, the former dean of dentistry at Bishop's, had only a part-time appointment as McGill's dental department chairman. In fact, all McGill instructors worked on a part-time basis only. Despite this fact, McGill dentists were asked to assume other responsibilities. An article of the 1904 agreement stipulated that the dental teaching staff were to be collectively and individually responsible for the financial affairs of the department, including any debts contracted in its name! It was all part of the job.

"As with so much else at McGill," notes Stanley Frost in *McGill University – For the Advancement of Learning*, "it was a question of money. In the absence of either a wealthy donor or public funding, the dental department had to be operated as economically as possible."

The faculty of medicine offered some administrative support.

In 1908, one of McGill's major teaching hospitals — the Montreal General Hospital, then located just north of Old Montreal — opened a new dental teaching clinic, a first in a Canadian general hospital.

The official opening announcement was glowing.

"The space devoted to the clinic contains, in addition to an office and a waiting room, a large, well-lighted operating room furnished with Columbia chairs having fountain cuspidors and operating brackets," the statement said. "Communicating with the operating room is the anaesthetic room equipped with all modern conveniences for the extraction of teeth, including a nitrous-oxide apparatus for gas anaesthesia. There is also a laboratory with complete equipment including electric lathes and a plaster and vulcanizing room."

In 1920, Dr. A.W. Thornton, chairman of the dental executive of the faculty of medicine, became the first dean of the new faculty of dentistry of McGill University. The faculty was housed in the east wing of the classic gray-stone Strathcona Building, where it remains to this day. Florence Johnston, described by Dr. Mervyn A. Rogers in *A History of the McGill Dental School* as "a beautiful if somewhat large person," became the first woman to register in dentistry at McGill in 1922. The faculty of medicine refused to allow women until 1918 and dentistry was bound by its rules.

In 1924, the tall, personable Irishman Dr. Gordon Leahy became clinical director. He remained the only full-time teacher in the faculty until 1947. "He hated lecturing and



Class of 2005.

did not do it well,” writes Dr. Rogers about colleague Dr. Leahy. “His greatest contribution was through clinical and laboratory demonstration. He was a good clinician and he could demonstrate procedures well. He did not require many instruments — just a few chisels and burrs — but he certainly knew how to use them. He continued to operate a foot engine, which he pedaled himself, long after students had changed to electric motors.... His students loved him.”

There was one other key permanent position.

Miss Anne Ferguson became executive secretary to the faculty in 1928 and held the position until she retired in 1956. “She was a strong person who assumed tremendous responsibilities,” Dr. Rogers wrote. “She lived for her work and loved every minute of it.” He described her as “a religious person who abhorred smoking and drinking.” She was also described as someone with a keen interest in the students, which continued long after they graduated.

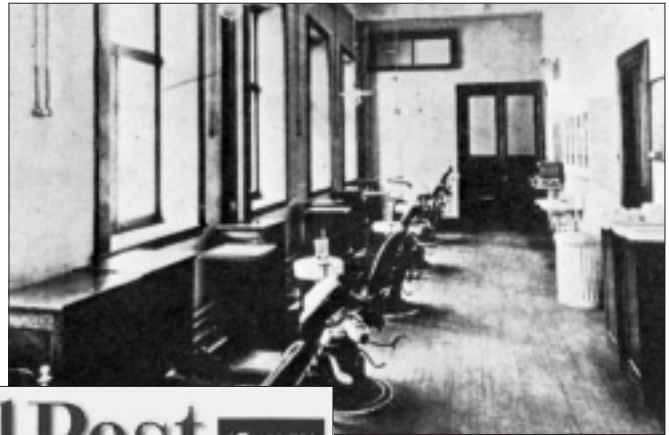
For decades, the faculty’s strength was its ability to turn out class after class of excellent practising professionals. This was due in part to the efforts of Dr. Leahy and hundreds of dedicated Montreal dentists.

Enrollment dipped during the Depression, but classes grew throughout the Second World War.

In time for the faculty’s 50th birthday celebrations, a state-of-the-art teaching clinic opened in 1955 at the new Montreal General Hospital building, now located on the slopes of Mount Royal. Not long after, in 1958, Dr. Lyman Francis became the faculty’s first full-time researcher. The colourful Dr. Francis had a successful career as a vaudeville acrobat before graduating from McGill as a dentist and obtaining his MSc in Pharmacology.

Attracting full-time staff was a slow process. Dr. Ambrose said that when he became dean in 1970, McGill was the school with the fewest full-time people in the whole country. “There was no question about the clinical skills of our graduates,” Dr. Ambrose explained in a recent interview. “The dentists who taught them were the best in Canada. But we had only 6 full-time staff. All the rest of the work — the lecturing, the research, the administration and everything else — was done by part-time people. If you want things done like research, you have to pay people full-time to do it.”

Dr. Ambrose, along with the deans who succeeded him, made it a priority to lobby McGill administrators for more funding to expand full-time staff and improve programs.



McGill dental clinic in the 1930s.



Dr. Catherine Bushnell, who holds a joint appointment in the faculty of dentistry and the department of anesthesia, has been making headlines.

Under his leadership, the faculty was able to offer its first graduate programs.

In the 1970s, Dr. Ambrose persuaded McGill to expand and re-equip the clinical facilities at the Montreal General Hospital. By the early 1990s, dental technology had changed dramatically. The clinic had to be re-equipped once more, to

prepare students for the actual conditions they would encounter in their professional lives. Once again, funding was secured for these improvements, this time from a donation by McGill philosopher Storrs McCall in memory of his parents.

McGill’s faculty of dentistry has learned many important lessons over its first 100 years of existence. It gained an understanding that it had to depend on itself for survival. It acquired strength from the vision and noble qualities of those chosen to lead the school. Finally, it has support from the professionals it produces, who continue to help the faculty grow and play its destined role in the academic and professional community.

These were not easy lessons to learn. In fact, it took a huge effort by a great many people over the past century to make the faculty the success it is today. But after all, as the McGill motto says, *Grandescunt aucta labore — By work all things increase and grow.* ♦

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The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the opinions or official policies of the Canadian Dental Association.