

Visionary plus pioneer equals Dr Pat McGeer

A fond look back at Dr McGeer's many contributions and achievements.

Brian Day, MB

In June 2017 Dr Pat McGeer, MD, PhD, FRCP(C), FRSC, will reach the magical age of 90 years. It is hard to imagine any other physician who has made such diverse contributions to BC and Canada. Dr McGeer is a native Vancouverite and one of the most distinguished and colorful personalities the city has ever produced. He and his wife, Professor Edith McGeer, PhD, FRCS, are probably the most productive husband-and-wife team of all time when it comes to medical research in Canada. Each has received numerous awards and distinctions, including the Order of Canada, Order of British Columbia, and Fellowship in the Royal Society of Canada. They are long-standing members of the UBC Faculty of Medicine, and both have served as head of the Department of Neuroscience. They remain actively involved in research at UBC to this day.

The early days

Dr Pat McGeer's relationship with UBC dates back over 70 years. As a student he was an elite basketball player and played a pivotal role as part of the team that defeated the world-famous Harlem Globetrotters at UBC Thunderbird Stadium in

Dr Day is an orthopaedic surgeon and honorary associate professor in the Department of Orthopaedics at the University of British Columbia (UBC/VGH).

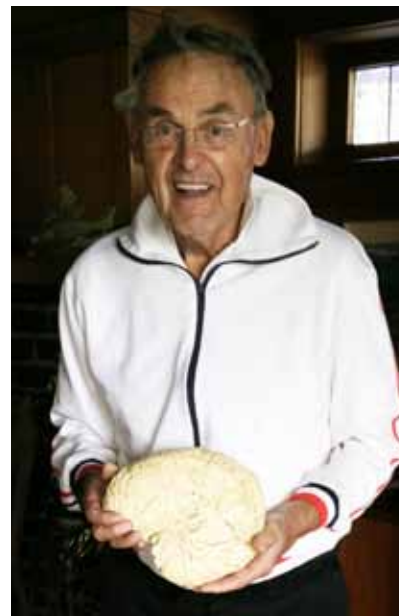
1946. He later represented Canada at the 1948 Olympic Games in London, England. After graduating from UBC with a degree in chemistry (with first-class honours) he pursued a PhD at Princeton. There he was exposed to and inspired by the lectures and teachings of Albert Einstein.

The start of his career

In the early 1950s Dr McGeer worked for DuPont during the great plastics and polymer revolution. There he met Edith and they married before returning to BC. Recognizing the potential growth and opportunities available in medical research, Pat enrolled at UBC Medical School in 1954. After graduating and completing an internship, he joined Edith in her research, focusing on studies in neurosciences. Together they remained at UBC and became world renowned for their work on brain neurotransmitters and degenerative neurological diseases, especially Alzheimer disease. Their three children inherited their parents' thirst for creativity and knowledge, and have also excelled in their chosen fields.

Politically active

Dr McGeer's political interests caused him to stand in a 1962 provincial by-election. He won a seat as a member of the Liberal Party of BC, continuing to hold office (later as a Social Credit member) until late in 1986. His various cabinet positions included



Dr McGeer holding a casting of Moby Doll's brain (2016).

stints as Minister of Education, Universities, Science and Communications, and Trade.

His drive and creativity were largely responsible for the development of the UBC campus-based hospital. This was no mean feat, since many in the medical establishment opposed the idea. The power base of clinical medicine, politically speaking, at that time was at the Vancouver General Hospital campus. Many in that group did not want a university hospital. They feared a loss of control to UBC and academia. Nevertheless, the concept of a campus-based teaching hospital made sense and the hospital has since become a centre of excellence.

Dr McGeer also revamped ICBC, amending many of the serious deficiencies and inefficiencies that had been designed into its structure and organization. He established the Open Learning Institute, the Knowledge Network, and much more. He was not afraid of controversy, being in the mold of an old-style (now extinct)

Continued on page 128

the good doctor



Dr McGeer (far left) on the UBC basketball team playing against the Harlem Globetrotters (1946).



Dr McGeer studying at Princeton (1950).



Dr McGeer (1973).

Continued from page 127

Churchillian type of politician. He was determined to fulfill promises made to his constituents and stay true to his philosophy. Many of his traits were likely learned from his uncle, Gerry McGeer, former mayor of Vancouver and later a federal MP.

One of the groups Dr McGeer resisted was the CRTC and its mission to force Canadian content onto consumers. That did not fit well with Pat's somewhat libertarian views. In June 1980, as Minister of Communications in BC, he described the Canadian-content requirements as being just as bad as being behind the iron curtain and not being able to listen to certain stations. His defiance in response to an order prohibiting Canadians from using satellite dishes led him to place a large satellite dish on the lawn of the BC Legislature.

He answered questions with disarming honesty. He was, perhaps, sometimes a little too honest and direct. He was once asked in an interview how difficult the change was from university and medical school politics to real politics, and he replied, "Not difficult at all. In the university setting I am required to sit around a

table arguing for our department's scarce resources with highly intelligent people, such as professors of mathematics, physics, philosophy, and so on; there is not the same difficulty at the cabinet table."

Environmental interests

Dr McGeer has also been acknowledged for his role in the changing attitudes toward whales and whaling. His involvement in the 1964 capture, medical care, and transportation of the famous whale they named Moby Doll helped put the Vancouver Aquarium on the world map. Over 20 000 people came to see the whale (matching the record crowd that turned up for the Beatles concert a month later). This generated a change in focus for organizations like Greenpeace from nuclear protests to marine and environmental issues. Few were aware that whales (orcas) were intelligent communicative mammals prior to Dr McGeer's work in the field, and even fewer are aware of the role he played in changing the attitudes of millions around the world.

Impact on the BC wine industry

His actions were not always popu-

lar. During that era BC had very poor quality wines. Dr McGeer was instrumental in creating the opportunity for entrepreneurs to develop the world-renowned wine industry that BC now enjoys. As a minister he slammed the quality of BC wines. His challenge to the leaders of the BC wine industry was highlighted by a 1974 blind wine tasting before the media. In that event Dr McGeer correctly identified the poorest wines as being BC produced. Press headlines praised him for "putting his palate where his mouth is," and there followed a renaissance in the BC wine industry. Within 20 years a BC chardonnay won first prize at the International Wine and Spirits Competition, a milestone that put BC on the world map in wine production. The September 2016 Royal visit to a BC winery (Mission Hill Family Estate) is a testament to the further evolution, growth, and stature of the BC wine industry.

Unfinished ideas

Some of Dr McGeer's ideas were never realized. He pushed hard for a fixed-link connection from the mainland to Vancouver Island. Some feasibility studies were undertaken,

and there was excitement as visitors to Expo 86 saw a model of the concept on display. He left politics after Expo 86 and was never able to show opponents, who claimed his idea was not feasible, how wrong they were. Many of his other successful ideas had been subjected to similar initial criticisms by skeptics and, certainly, with respect to the treatment of Alzheimer disease, it took the establishment many years to acknowledge the validity of his research.

Still achieving

After leaving political life Dr McGeer returned to full-time academic research. He still attends and works in his laboratory daily.

The McGeers can look back with great satisfaction on their many achievements. Their work on Alzheimer disease continues, and there are now exciting prospects for successful prevention and treatment. They have recently formed a biotech company working on inhibitors of complement activation.

Dr McGeer has stated that “the greatest discoveries in science are yet to be made.” This enthusiasm is likely what keeps him and Edith so active and enthusiastic about their research.

He also continues to play tennis regularly, preferring to play on one of the few grass courts left in the city—in his own backyard. Despite being in his 90th year, he still plays 4 to 5 times a week.

George Bernard Shaw’s famous statement is a fitting description for Dr Pat McGeer: “The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore, all progress depends on the unreasonable man.” And he would be the first to admit he would never have made such progress without the support of his wife and academic partner, Professor Edith McGeer.



Book review: *The Recorded History of the Liard Basin, 1790–1910*

By Anthony Kenyon, MD. *Fort Nelson News*, 2016. ISBN 978-177136-414-0. 519 pages.

Dr Anthony Kenyon’s book, *The Recorded History of the Liard Basin, 1790–1910*, is a definitive history of the Liard Basin—where BC joins Yukon and the Northwest Territories. The Liard Basin includes 20% of the landmass of British Columbia. The book includes maps, charts, sketches, biographies, vocabularies drawn from archival documents, references to original sources, and an index.

Scots, French, and Aboriginal people established the lucrative fur trade in the area under the guidance of Roderick Mackenzie. Letters and journals left behind describe the way of life, the role of women, and the Aboriginals’ language. Taking a country wife became an established practice. “Connubial alliances are the best security we can have of the goodwill of the Natives,” wrote George Simpson of the Hudson’s Bay Company.

Several major explorations went through the Liard Basin. In 1821 the first of John Franklin’s expeditions ended in disaster. Willard Wentzel recorded that Dr John Richardson and others resorted to cannibalism.

Original documents describe starvation, murder, the war between the North West Company and the

Hudson’s Bay Company, and their amalgamation in 1821.

By the mid-18th century the area had been largely explored. In 1858 missionaries arrived followed by the first steamship in 1886. A journal by Alfred Lee tracks the progress up the frozen Liard River, 1500 kilometres to the Klondike gold rush in 1897.

In his epilogue Dr Kenyon reflects on his book’s contents: “The facts and observations recorded in this book have not been selected. The information selected itself.”

Dr Anthony Kenyon graduated in medicine from Cambridge University in 1958, worked in central Africa for 3 years, and then completed surgical training in the UK and Canada. He arrived in Fort Nelson in 1966 to take on a 4-month locum and stayed 50 years. His in-depth historical work was written for local residents as well as the academic community.

—George Szasz, CM, MD

Genetic testing and the insurance industry in Canada

The American Medical Association notes that there are over 48 000 genetic tests currently available for health risk screening or diagnostic purposes, and the number is rising. Genetic tests can reveal predisposition to certain cancers, degenerative diseases such as Huntington disease, metabolic disorders, and a growing number of other conditions. Genetic testing is also becoming more affordable. In 2015 a US company announced it could provide full genome sequencing at a price of \$999. Other companies are competing to lower that price.

This expanding consumer market is provoking strong debate about the implications of genetic testing for individuals seeking life and health

Continued on page 130