

Dr. Gordon Fahrni, who lived history of both Canada and the CMA, dies at 108

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[\[résumé\]](#)

Abstract

Dr. Gordon Samuel Fahrni, Canada's oldest physician and a past president of the CMA, died Nov. 3 at the age of 108. He will be remembered for a lifetime of service to the profession as a clinician, teacher, military physician, scientist, writer and leader in organized medicine.

Résumé

Le Dr Gordon Samuel Fahrni, doyen des médecins du Canada et ancien président de l'AMC, est décédé le 3 novembre dernier, à l'âge de 108 ans. Le Dr Fahrni nous laisse le souvenir impérissable de sa dévotion à la médecine sa vie durant et de son travail inlassable de clinicien, enseignant, médecin militaire, chercheur, écrivain et chef de file de la profession médicale.

In these days of increasing bureaucracy, the CMA, with its divisions and members, is responsible to the people for developing and maintaining a high level of health care. The confidence of the people from whom we accept this sacred trust calls for the subjugation of petty personal desires that might conflict with hitting the target of a high level of health care for the people of Canada. To those of you in the forefront of medical administration, may I paraphrase in saying: You may seldom attain your ideals, but be comforted; ideals were made not for attainment, but for pursuit. Perseverance, logic and integrity will prevail.

- Dr. Gordon Fahrni, upon accepting the CMA's Special Medal for Outstanding Service in 1980

A chapter in medical history closed Nov. 3 with the death of Dr. Gordon S. Fahrni, Canada's oldest physician and a past president of the CMA. The highly regarded centenarian, a native of Manitoba who had lived in Vancouver since the 1950s, was 108.

Even though he hadn't practised medicine for 30 years, Gordon Samuel Fahrni had remained a highly regarded voice in the halls of organized medicine and a champion of the CMA. He earned the esteem of colleagues through his lifetime commitment to his profession, a commitment that spanned the eight decades from WW I until his death.

He was still making representations to the CMA as late as August, when he sent a video to the Winnipeg annual meeting that expressed his concern about the national debt and its effect on health care. Excerpts of the video were shown at General Council, a courtesy that Dr. Douglas Perry, the speaker, ruled would be extended to every CMA past president who reaches the age of 105.

"He was a cherished member of the medical community," Dr. Jack Armstrong, the president, said when Dr. Fahrni's death was announced. "He will be missed."

The story of Canada's oldest physician began in Gladstone, Man., about 100 miles west of Winnipeg, on Apr. 13, 1887, when Gordon Fahrni was born to homesteader Mennonite parents who raised their six children on a 1500-acre ranch.

The story of his life is the fabric of Canadian history: he witnessed the rule of every Canadian prime minister except Alexander Mackenzie, remembered the excitement of the day the Wright brothers made history's first manned flight, watched Canada change from an agriculture-based colony to one of the Group of Seven industrialized nations, and saw universal health care evolve into one of the defining characteristics of our society.

In an Apr. 1, 1987, *CMAJ* article marking his 100th birthday, he recalled the diseases that stalked Canada when he was a boy. Two childhood friends and a few relatives had died of diphtheria and tuberculosis, and he asked himself, "Why doesn't somebody do something about this?" He decided to become a doctor.

At 17 he was admitted to Wesley College in Winnipeg, and in 1911 he graduated in medicine from the University of Manitoba. He chose a lengthy internship and residency in medicine followed by a residency in surgery. After serving with the Canadian Army Medical Corps during WW I, he opened a surgical practice in Winnipeg and taught in successively senior appointments in the university's Faculty of Medicine.

He became interested in diseases of the thyroid gland, a common affliction on the Prairies until iodine was added to table salt in the early 1930s. A founder of the American Goitre Association and its president in 1928, Dr. Fahrni was acknowledged as a North American expert on goitre surgery and as a pioneer in the use of local anesthetic. He recalled in one of many media profiles that he was uneasy with the difficult-to-control anesthesia of the day, which involved pouring ether on a mask that covered the patient's face. "I used to get into fights with the anesthetist," he recalled. "Patients would be so deeply under they wouldn't wake up until late in the evening after the surgery. I'd get scared as hell they wouldn't wake up at all. Whenever I could, I'd perform operations under local anesthetic."

In *CMAJ*'s 1987 article, Dr. Nathaniel Blair, a fellow surgeon and CMA past president, recalled being Dr. Fahrni's resident at the Winnipeg General in 1937: "We used to do four or five operations in a morning. He was a delight in the operating theatre because he never got flustered. But we had to go like clockwork. I remember him saying to me one day, 'Blair, what's the matter with you? You're not clicking. Now watch! This is how we do it. One, two cut! One, two cut! Got that?' "

Dr. Fahrni's surgical practice and busy community life in Winnipeg were interrupted by WW II. In 1940, when president-elect of the CMA, he was instrumental in establishing the Medical Procurement and Assignment Board to assist the Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps (RCAMC) in balancing medical services for servicemen abroad and civilians at home. In 1942 he was appointed surgical consultant to the RCAMC. Besides encouraging the practice of early postoperative ambulation, he was involved in decision making about the supply of penicillin, the postwar maintenance of blood-transfusion services and improvement of rehabilitation services for returning servicemen in veterans' hospitals. His wartime achievements were recognized by the British army's director general of medical services, whom Dr. Fahrni quoted, with obvious pride, in a 1981 *CMAJ* article: "We thank Canada for the liberal supply of penicillin and blood in our time of need, and where in hell did you get all those well-trained young surgeons?"

In 1946 Dr. Fahrni returned to his private practice in Winnipeg, his staff position at the Winnipeg General Hospital, and his teaching at the university. In 1951 he decided to leave his practice to his son, Dr. Gordon P. Fahrni, and his associate, Dr. Roy Richardson. He and his wife, Ailie, moved to Vancouver, where their daughter Phyllis lived, and he opened a new practice that he maintained until retiring in 1965.

Dr. Fahrni's contributions to organized medicine date to the early days of his career. In a tribute to mark the 50th anniversary of his entry to medicine, he was called "a doctor's doctor, a man who has singlehandedly advanced the cause of the medical profession in this country. Much of his career has been dedicated to helping physicians to organize themselves as professionals and to communicate more effectively with one another."

In 1921 he spearheaded a move to breathe new life into the CMA, and helped overturn a motion to let the then debt-ridden association die. In 1923, when he became president of the Manitoba Medical Association, he was determined to overcome the isolation of rural practitioners; he helped organize the province into districts to encourage a program of continuing education. In 1929 he was a key figure in the establishment of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada.

Dr. Fahrni served as president of the CMA in 1941-42. Recognizing the importance of the association's evolving history, he organized the past presidents as a resource for the association when historical and archival matters were being considered; the resulting Committee on Archives became the voice of the past presidents. He was a generous benefactor himself, and at age 101 turned over his papers, military dog tags and other memorabilia, plus most of his published material, to the CMA. The Historical Records Section was named the Dr. Gordon S. Fahrni Archives in 1991 -- the same year the association honoured him on the 50th anniversary of his presidency. The CMA was also the recipient of his generous financial gift, which formed the basis of the CMA Foundation Trust.

Dr. Fahrni, who had been awarded the CMA's Special Medal for Outstanding Service in 1980, maintained his interest in the national association until his death. He was a regular attendee of meetings and General Councils, with his last appearance taking place in Calgary in 1993. He sent his regrets to Montreal in 1994, and this past August -- ever the innovator and trendsetter -- he made the first-ever video appearance to delegates attending a CMA annual meeting.

He had a long-standing interest in the work of the British Columbia Medical Association (BCMA), which nominated him for senior membership in the CMA. When he turned 100, he was named the BCMA's first honorary president. He was a founding member of the British Columbia Housing Foundation and the first patron of the Canadian Association of

Gerontology. He was also heavily involved in community activities. The nation recognized his contributions in 1988, when he was appointed to the Order of Canada.

Incredibly, Dr. Fahrni found time in his busy life to pursue other personal interests: writing, hunting and golf were notable. Besides his extensive medical and scientific publications, particularly related to his special interest in problems of the thyroid gland, he published an autobiography, *Prairie Surgeon*, in 1947. This sportsman and outdoorsman enjoyed a lifetime of autumn hunting trips, and one of his passions was golf. He was an avid member of Vancouver's Shaughnessy Golf and Country Club, where the local newspapers photographed him annually celebrating his 100-plus birthdays. He was even featured in the international golf magazine, *Score*, when at age 100 he was still the first member of his foursome to arrive for a twice-a-week game.

Work hard, play hard, was his motto. A Vancouver columnist who interviewed him on his 107th birthday reported the secret of his longevity: "I have always worked hard. I have always had interests outside of work -- hunting, fishing, golf. I don't worry. I get over failures and disappointments.

"I do the best I can."

He will, as CMA President Armstrong said, be sorely missed.

A memorial service for Dr. Fahrni was held in Vancouver Nov. 9. In delivering the eulogy, Dr. Peter Banks -- a CMA past president and a longtime friend -- said Dr. Fahrni's was "a wonderful life, lived to the full, in which he enriched us all merely by knowing him."

Dr. Fahrni lived with a "solid philosophy of goodness and kindness to all men," and maintained his remarkable interest in current affairs and the medical profession until his death.

Not only was he generous to the CMA and its archives, Dr. Banks recalled, "Gordon was a walking archive. We would show him an old photograph, and he would say immediately that that was so-and-so. I noted that he always mentioned the good things about his colleagues, because this is how he lived his life - always looking for the best in people."

"It is impossible for us to express how much we will miss him."

He is survived by his son, Gordon; daughter, Phyllis; three grandchildren and three great-grandchildren. Memorial donations may be sent to St. Vincent's Hospital Foundation, 6650 Arbutus Street, Vancouver, BC V6P 5S5.

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