Gordon M Wyant (1914–2009)

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Dr Gordon Wyant died on October 22, 2009, in Victoria, British Columbia, at 95 years of age. He was a professor of anesthesia, a pioneer in pain management and a key figure in the early years of the Canadian Pain Society (CPS). I will briefly outline his unusual and eventful life and then emphasize his work in pain management, mentioning only briefly his long career in anesthesia.

He was born on March 28, 1914, as Günter Maximilian Weiss in Frankfurt am Main, Germany, and was raised as a Lutheran in a nonobservant Jewish family. He began his medical studies at Würzburg, Germany, in 1932, but with the rise of Hitler, he realized there was no future for him in Germany, and he continued medical school in Bologna, Italy. On a visit home in 1937, he was arrested by the Gestapo, stripped of his German citizenship, deported and ordered never to return to Germany. He completed medical school in Bologna in 1938. Because Italy was then an ally of Germany, he was forced to leave again. He planned to enter a medical mission in Africa, which brought him into Anglican theological studies in England. However, in 1940, he was interned by the British as an enemy alien and sent under harsh conditions to Australia, where he remained for more than a year. In late 1941, he agreed to enlist in the Royal Army Medical Corps, eventually serving in Scotland, England and West Africa. During the war, he and his brother, who was now serving with American forces in Italy, changed their surname to Wyant to make it sound less German. In 1949, he joined his parents in Chicago, Illinois, USA, and began practicing anesthesia in various hospitals, eventually becoming head of anesthesia at Loyola University (Chicago). In 1954, he came to Canada to become the founding professor of anesthesia at the newly opened hospital of the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, where he remained until his retirement in 1987. He provided medicolegal consultation until 1998. In 1997, he moved to Duncan, British Columbia.

Dr Wyant won many honours for his work in anesthesia, and his service to military and community organizations. In 1991, he was invested as an Officer in the Order of Canada in recognition of his “distinguished career as a physician, researcher and educator.” In 1970/1971, he was president of the Canadian Anaesthetists’ Society, which also awarded him its Gold Medal. He achieved the rank of lieutenant colonel and commanded a medical company in the Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps. He also served on diocesan and national synods in the Anglican Church. In 1998, he received the Distinguished Career Award from the CPS.

In 1975, he attended the first meeting of the International Association for the Study of Pain in Florence, Italy. Here, he

met some of the anesthetists who were leading the field at that time, including John Bonica. In 1976/1977, seeking a change after 23 years as department head, he travelled to China to study acupuncture for three months, then took his first sabbatical and visited pain clinics in Toronto (Ontario), Montreal (Quebec), Los Angeles (California, USA) and Seattle (Washington, USA), among others, spending up to two months in some of the clinics. On his return to Saskatoon, he founded the Pain Management Service at the Royal University Hospital. In the 1970s, the concept of an interdisciplinary pain team was new, and the Saskatoon clinic was one of the first six such services in Canada. The team varied considerably over time, but often included a neurosurgeon, neurologist, psychologist, physiotherapist, dentist, nurse, chiropractor, social worker, pharmacist and trainees in several of these disciplines. With the support of the team, Dr Wyant provided inpatient acute pain consultation, nerve blocks and outpatient chronic pain management.

He was an active scholar as well as a practitioner and academic administrator in anesthesia. PubMed lists 91 publications from 1951 (“The use of curare drugs in endoscopy”) through 1991 (“Treatment of chronic pain by epidural spinal cord stimulation”). In 11 of these, starting in 1977, the term ‘pain’ is indexed.

He was the founding Editor-in-Chief of *The Pain Clinic*, a position he held for 10 years. He was active on the executive of the Canadian Chapter, International Association for the Study of Pain, which became the CPS. He was the founding president of the Canadian Pain Foundation, which was established by the CPS in 1985.

The Pain Management Service at the Royal University Hospital remained under Dr Wyant’s direction from 1977 to 1988, during which time he assessed more than 5000 patients with chronic pain. He devoted at least 1 h, and often more than 2 h, to each new patient, taking the history and conducting the examination with a thoroughness that few patients had ever experienced. Once every two weeks, winter and summer, he drove 250 km to Regina, Saskatchewan, where he operated a satellite clinic. In addition to prescribing medications and referring patients to numerous other disciplines, he administered transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation, epidurals and regional nerve blocks and, for a few years, occasionally added acupuncture to the clinic. His aspiration to provide a truly comprehensive and integrated multidisciplinary pain service was realized in only a minority of cases because of limited resources. It was a frequent frustration to Dr Wyant that patients faced long waits to see clinicians from other disciplines who should have been available at the time of initial assessment.

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Colleagues and subordinates frequently found Dr Wyant fractious and a perfectionist, especially when it came to matters of patient care, in which he supported no compromise of quality. He was meticulous and impatient with any sloppiness. Every report was typed twice, often by himself, with extensive manual corrections and a fussy attention to grammatical style. For example, he never failed to correct me when I said or wrote 'may' instead of 'might.' On the other hand, his patients remember him as the paradigm of kindness. I remember him explaining to me how he would occasionally prescribe "50 mL whisky hs [at bedtime]" as a comfort measure for inpatients who were used to a nightcap. Dr Hang C Ha, a Saskatoon anesthetist and expert in regional anesthesia, writes that Dr Wyant was a great teacher of regional anesthesia (personal communication, 2009). Dr Wyant was very meticulous and precise in locating anatomical landmarks. He was gentle and pleasant in explaining details of procedures to patients. He was always available on weekends when needed (although he hated to miss the Saturday afternoon opera on the radio). He

was generous in allowing research access to his patients and facilities. He was very respectful and supportive of the contributions of other disciplines to pain management.

Dr Wyant left his mark on pain management in Canada. Those of us who had the privilege of working with him carry his spirit forward in our work.

AUTHOR NOTE: The author, now Professor Emeritus of Psychology and Associate Member in Pediatrics at the University of Saskatchewan, was the half-time clinical and research psychologist in Dr Wyant's Pain Management Service from 1978 to 1988. Further details about Dr Wyant and his family are available in the official obituary at <www.passagesmb.com/obituary_details.cfm?ObitID=156602> (accessed on January 19, 2010), and in *Dr. Gordon Michael Wyant, A Memoir* (as told to Rosemary Neering, privately published, 1998).

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