Dr M. N. SMITH-PETERSEN
1886-1953

Dr M. N. Smith-Petersen died on June 16 at the age of sixty-seven after a short illness. This sad news only trickled through to this country ten days later, and the result has been a numb and void feeling in the hearts of British and English-speaking orthopaedic surgeons throughout the world.

Dr Smith-Petersen’s name is known to every medical man and woman. He has left his mark by virtue of his skill and thought, with reference to hip joint surgery in particular, but throughout his professional career his strong personality, mixed with a great sense of humility and kindness, attracted his patients, pupils and colleagues very closely to him. Not only was he the “surgical master,” but the friend and confidant of all who had the privilege to come into contact with him. Although he was somewhat shy and sensitive as an individual, his powers of concentration and real deep thinking made him a great leader and teacher in the art and science of orthopaedic surgery.

He was born at Grimstad in Norway, and went to the United States in 1903, attending Westside High School, Milwaukee, before commencing his University education at the Universities of Chicago (1906-7) and Wisconsin and finally at the Harvard Medical School.
He qualified B.S. (Wisconsin) in 1910 and M.D. (Harvard) in 1914, and was awarded an Honorary M.D. of Oslo in 1946. In Boston, in addition to being Instructor in Orthopaedic Surgery at Harvard Medical School (1930–35) and Clinical Professor of Orthopaedic Surgery (1935–46), he became Chief of the Orthopaedic Service at the Massachusetts General Hospital (1929–46). This Scandinavian-American mixture had the strongest anglophone leanings, and these were further developed by his contact with British orthopaedic surgeons, in particular Sir Robert Jones in the latter half of the first world war, and subsequently.

From very early days in his medical career Smith-Petersen was a pioneer. In the course of his Moynihan Lecture in 1947, he himself told the story of the original planning and execution of the anterior approach to the hip joint in 1917, stimulated in the first place by Dr Roy Abbott, and encouraged later by his Chief, Dr Elliott G. Brackett, with whom he worked in the greatest harmony for many years. Subsequently, this approach was developed into the acetabuloplasty operation, which he described in 1936 for the relief of pain and restoration of function in cases of malum coxae senilis, old slipped upper femoral epiphysis, intrapelvic protrusion of the acetabulum and coxa plana.

Three years later, we find a further development in the form of vitallium mould arthroplasty, with preliminary trials of several materials including glass (1923), viscoloid (1925), pyrex (1933) and bakelite (1938). There can be no doubt that the thought, study and care which Dr Smith-Petersen put into his work on arthroplasty of the hip provoked worldwide interest and progress, and it is to be noted that a long period of research preceded his final operative technique.

Of course, his fame in connection with the hip joint dates back to 1930–31, when he introduced the use of the three-flanged nail for internal fixation in femoral neck fractures. At that time, he wrote: ‘A great responsibility rests on the surgeon who introduces a new method of treatment. The desire to have a new idea published is so great that the originator is often led astray, and the method is broadcast before it has proved worthwhile, and before the technique has been perfected.’ This humble approach to his work was typical of the man, but there is no doubt that the opposition he aroused as a pioneer made him somewhat hypersensitive to criticism, and this was most apparent in his work on the surgery of sacro-iliac disease. His great aim, both in theory and practice, was to be constructive, and thus we find him developing many procedures for the relief of pain and restoration of function in the deformed joints of the unfortunate sufferers from chronic arthritis. One of the more dramatic of these operations is spinal osteotomy, for correction of severe fixed flexion deformity, and in 1941 the whole conception of this procedure was worked out on paper to the last detail, before being put into effect most successfully and dramatically.

As an operator, he was slow and meticulous. In this respect he was much influenced by his early training under Harvey Cushing, when doing an internship at the Peter Bent Brigham Hospital (1914–15), and the exposure and closure of all his operations followed the normal anatomical pattern as closely as possible.

Dr Smith-Petersen undoubtedly was seen at his best when dealing with patients, either on a ward round or in his office. Every problem was an individual one, and with his quiet smile and sly wink he captivated both patients and pupils alike. No man has ever portrayed the essential spirit of the doctor-patient relationship better. On social occasions, he loved to be surrounded by the younger men who were his students and pupils, ‘toasting’ in a Scandinavian manner, and provoking both thoughtful and humorous discussion, but always reaching and clarifying the fundamental issues at stake.

After the second world war he visited Great Britain in 1947, 1948 and 1952. On the foremost occasion he was made an Honorary Fellow of the British Orthopaedic Association, and also delivered the fourth Moynihan Lecture at the University of Leeds. He also took charge of the orthopaedic staff conference and operated before a distinguished audience at the London Hospital. At a reception following this occasion the gift of his characteristic
ties will long be remembered by the recipients. It was during this friendly and amusing ceremony that the household dog laid her favourite bone at Dr Smith-Petersen's feet, and this bone was none other than half the pelvis including the hip joint! After the termination of this visit to England a Jensen silver bowl was presented to him by the staff of the London Hospital at a simple and moving little ceremony, which brought tears to the eyes of this great and sentimental man.

A year ago Dr Smith-Petersen, accompanied by his wife, visited London to be given the Honorary Fellowship of the Royal Society of Medicine, and to attend the meeting of English-speaking orthopaedic surgeons in London and the provinces. Fortunately, he had a chance of seeing most of his friends and was able to visit several of their homes, so our memory of him is both recent and happy.

These visits to Great Britain were always followed by a return to his native land, Norway, where he was held in high esteem. In 1946 he was honoured with the award of Commander of the Royal Norwegian Order of Saint Olaf, and received the Grand Cross in 1947. He was also an Honorary Member of the Norwegian Surgical Association.

Other societies which awarded him honorary membership include the Canadian Orthopaedic Association, the Royal Medical Society of Edinburgh and the Italian Society of Orthopaedic Surgery and Traumatology. He was a Fellow of the American Orthopaedic Association, and held the office of president of the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgery in 1943. During the second world war he was consultant in orthopaedic surgery to the Surgeon General. He was also a member of the International Society of Orthopaedic Surgeons, and an Associate Member of the French Academy of Orthopaedic Surgery.

To Mrs Smith-Petersen, whom he married in 1917 and who hailed from Fitchburg, to his daughter Hilda, and to his two sons Porter and Morten, we extend our deepest sympathy in their bereavement, and we wish them to know that orthopaedic surgeons the world over are sharing their great loss, and will miss the stimulus of this great orthopaedic surgeon and thinker.

W. A. L.