

Clarence Meredith Hincks

1885 – 1964

“A Recollection”

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With his active professional career spanning the period between the two great wars, Dr. Hincks was pivotal in founding the mental health movement and promoting the development of psychiatric personnel and facilities in Canada. He died at Christmastime in 1964 in Toronto, in his eightieth year.

He graduated in medicine at the University of Toronto in 1907, then entered general practice in Toronto and accepted a part-time post as Medical Inspector in Toronto schools. This initiated his interest in mental hygiene. Learning about the Binet-Simon tests of intelligence, he introduced them into Canada in 1910. He began a consultation service for the Juvenile Court and, under Dr. C. K. Clarke's supervision, developed a psychiatric outpatient clinic at the Toronto Psychiatric Hospital.

In 1917 he met Clifford Beers, the founder of the National Committee for Mental Hygiene, in New York. He conceived the idea of organizing a similar committee in Canada. With the patronage of the Governor-General and a distinguished Board of Directors, the new organization was inaugurated in Ottawa in April 1918. He devoted the rest of his career to this organization which is now the Canadian Mental Health Association and many years to its sister organization in the United States.

Among the more outstanding accomplishments of Dr. Hincks and the mental health organization were the surveys of mental hospitals in all provinces, which led to immediate improvements, reforms, training programs for staff and the establishment of new facilities. He helped to develop departments of psychiatry and psychology, nursery schools, mental hygiene and child study institutes in several of the leading universities.

In 1930 he accepted an invitation to become Medical Director of the National Committee for Mental Hygiene in the United States, succeeding Dr. Frankwood Williams. He kept his post and base of operations in Canada, commuting several times a month to New York.

During World War II, he organized a uniformed corps of nursery school workers, educators and social workers to go to England in order to help establish day nurseries for the thousands of children evacuated from the blitzed industrial areas. He was one of the founders of the International Committee for Mental Hygiene, which later was reorganized as the World Federation for Mental Health.

Although he was a most modest man he received many honours during his life, including honorary degrees from the University of Toronto and the University of British Columbia. He held life fellowships in the American Psychiatric Association, the American Orthopsychiatry Association and in the Canadian Psychiatric Association. He received the first Mental Health Award of the Mental Hygiene Institute of Montréal and the Coronation Medal in 1953. He was a member of the Comité d'Honneur of the World Federation for Mental Health.

Mental and emotional illness was familiar to Doctor Hincks in a personal way. Ever since his days as a medical student, he suffered repeated spells of anxiety, depression and apathy. Far from feeling discouraged by this disability, he felt it was an asset, for it enabled him to know and understand at first hand some of the suffering of those he was striving so hard to help. He felt strongly that only by such open admission and the evidence that illness did not impose permanent disability, could he change some of the existing public prejudice in connection with such illness.

Sensitivity, compassion and empathy are helpful to a public crusader but by themselves are not enough. Doctor Hincks had all these qualities and in addition he had courage, conviction, aggressiveness and an indignant impatience which kept him going, often in the face of professional and political resentment. His aggressive indignation was never directed personally but was reserved for the larger issues – obsolete government policies, professional irresponsibility and public complacency. His greatest enemy was “Man’s inhumanity to man.” His life stands as a model and a spur to those who follow him.