

SIR THOMAS SPENCER WELLS, BART., F.R.C.S.,  
*London, England.*

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SIR SPENCER WELLS was born at St. Albans, Hertfordshire, England, on February 3, 1818, and died at Cap d'Antibes, where he had gone for a short sojourn, on January 31, 1897. He had suffered from a slight attack of paralysis two years before, but his indomitable perseverance caused him to ignore the inconveniences of the attack, and he would not recognize that which his friends had noticed, that his strength had gone from him. The second attack carried him off in twelve hours.

As a boy, Wells took a high interest in natural science, and this led him to select the medical profession. He became a pupil of the late Mr. Sadler, of Barnsley (York), where he had large opportunities of seeing severe accidents. He then went at the age of seventeen years to Leeds, became a pupil of and unqualified assistant to a parish surgeon, and attended lectures of the "second Hey." He also attended the classes of the "elder" Teale. Of the influences of these two men he always spoke with the warmest feelings of gratitude.

After a little more than a year he left Leeds and entered at St. Thomas's Hospital, London, where he attained distinction, and after two years he took membership of the Royal College of Surgeons, England, and then entered the Royal Navy as surgeon. He served in the Naval Hospital at Malta for six years, during which time, he afterward stated, he saw only one case which raised even a suspicion of ovarian disease.

Having left the navy, he proceeded in 1848 to Paris, to study pathology under Magendie and Claude Bernard. Among the English there who had come for the same purpose he met the late Dr. Waters, of Chester, and had frequent discussions with him on the subject of ovariectomy. They both came to the conclusion, like most English surgeons of that time, that it was an unjustifiable operation, but up to that time Wells admitted that nowhere had he seen any case which could be positively pronounced to be one of ovarian disease.

In 1853 Wells settled down to practice in London, turning his attention particularly to obstetric practice, though he showed considerable skill in ophthalmic surgery, for which his manipulative aptitude excellently fitted him.

In 1854 he became attached to the Samaritan Free Hospital for Women, with which institution he remained connected during the remainder of his life. It was about this period that he became editor of the *Medical Times and Gazette*, and in that capacity he became acquainted with many prominent members of the profession who were afterward associated with him in his work. The man who probably exerted the greatest influence over his future was Baker Brown, who about that time was attempting the revival of the generally condemned operation of ovariectomy. The two Hunters had discussed the operation, and it had been tried by Aston Key and Bransby Cooper at Guy's and elsewhere, but not with a success which would lead to the establishment of ovariectomy as a recognized operation. It was not till Charles Clay appeared as an advocate of the operation that it became at all recognized as possibly coming within the sphere of an accepted and useful operation.

In April, 1854, Spencer Wells in company with Mr. T. W. Nunn, of the Middlesex Hospital, assisted Mr. Baker Brown in his eighth case of ovariectomy. This was the first time Wells had seen that operation. The result, like six out of nine cases, was not satisfactory. In discussing the opera-

tion with him afterward, Brown remarked, "It is the peritonitis that beats us." It was chiefly in the after-treatment that these discouraging results occurred.

In 1857 Wells himself performed his first operation, contrary to the advice of Baker Brown, who, nevertheless, assisted him. He lost his case; but he was not discouraged. He persevered, and the next year he again operated and with success. From that time forward his results are a portion of the surgical history not only of the century but of all time.

Wells's dexterity was great, his mechanical genius was keen in appreciating the requirements of the operation; but he is mostly to be remembered for that instinct of genius which enabled him to see clearly the possibility of ultimate success, and that force of character which enabled him to persevere in the face of opposition, unkind criticism, and every discouragement. Speaking of this, he says: "I felt that nothing but the most open frankness would carry conviction of success or, in case of failure, justify the operation. I therefore pledged myself to make known through the press all that I did and all that befell me." He deserves the greatest praise for his courage in making known his failures as well as his success, a plan not always followed by ovariologists of that period.

In 1857 he became lecturer on Surgery at the Grosvenor School of Medicine, which eight years later became the school of St. George's Hospital. Previous to this time the Crimean War had broken out, and Spencer Wells left his private practice and work at the Samaritan Hospital and went to Smyrna, where he became surgeon to the British Civil Hospital there, and went afterward to Renkiol. Here he saw a great many cases almost entirely new to him, and he considered that the experience he gained was invaluable to him in showing that the peritoneum would stand much rougher handling than he had previously imagined, giving him the boldness which characterized his later work. Remembering

the results of careful cleaning, he ceased to be frightened at opening the peritoneum.

How success followed his return to England is known to all. Instead of making a long abdominal wound, rapidly dragging out the cysts and then rapidly closing the wound, he only made a short one, through which he tapped the cyst and took his time to cleanse out the peritoneum with sponges. Anæsthesia permitted slow operation, but his predecessors often erred, after the introduction of anæsthetics, in employing the same hurry as before. For some time Wells was much in favor of using the clamp, but in later years he discarded it, seeing that the ligature was better. His advocacy of passing the stitches, when closing the abdominal wound, beyond the margin of the peritoneal edge, so as to bring it into the wound, whereby the two surfaces of peritoneum came into contact, excluded one of the many risks of the operation. This improvement was the result of experiment on animals. He also was the first to show that the removal of the diseased ovary can be done during gestation without interference with the pregnancy, although in the first case, it was by accident, the pregnancy having been overlooked. He lived to see the operation established not only in England, but throughout the world. He saw others adding their experience to his, suggesting here and there improvements in details, and he saw the antiseptic treatment insure greater certainty of good results in places and under conditions where otherwise death would have followed, and his boldness in dealing with the peritoneum no doubt pointed the way to the still more bold operations on abdominal organs which have revolutionized surgery of the cavities.

In 1880 Wells operated on his one thousandth case, and after that date he did many more. He resigned his active work at the Samaritan Hospital and became consulting surgeon in 1878, really and not in name only.

As above stated, three and a half years ago, while travelling in India, he was attacked by influenza from which he

slowly developed paralysis, much noticeable in his speech; but up till last autumn he might have been seen driving his own carriage from his beautifully situated country house at Golders Hill, Hempstead, to his town residence, for he was fond of horses, was a good rider and driver, and a good judge of horseflesh. Almost up to the last he was one of the members of the medical profession most often to be seen at the medical gatherings. He had the appearance of a healthy, vigorous country gentleman. He was of easy, pleasing manners, open and frank, and without assumption of superiority. His operations were perfect models to be imitated; he worked in perfect silence, his assistants well in hand, a circumstance of great value to them in after life. At the conclusion of every operation he personally superintended the cleansing and drying of every single instrument and placing it in its own case.

Every forward movement had Wells's attention. It was this that attracted him to ovariectomy. He was a vigorous advocate.

In 1865 he published his first work *On the Diseases of the Ovaries*, and, at the same time, *A Note-book for Cases of Ovarian and Other Abdominal Tumors*. This book has been through seven editions. In 1882 enlarged editions of these were published, and in 1884 a short history of the revival of ovariectomy was brought out, and a second edition the next year. He was also author of a great number of valuable communications to be found in the *Transactions of the London Obstetrical* and other societies. He also contributed freely to medical periodicals.

In 1877 he was Hunterian Professor of Surgery and Pathology at the Royal College of Surgeons, England; in 1879, Vice-President, and in 1883 President, of the Royal College of Surgeons, England; in 1883 he delivered the Hunterian oration at the college; five years later he was Morton Lecturer on Cancer, and in 1890 Bradshaw Lecturer at the same college.

He was an Honorary Fellow of the King's and Queen's

University of Ireland; M.D. University Leyden and of Bologna; Doctor of University of Charkow. In 1883 the honor of baronetcy was conferred upon him. He was also Deputy Lieutenant for the County of London. He left five daughters and one son, Arthur Spencer Wells, who succeeds to the title.

It might be added that beside the interest he took in cremation, emphasized by his disposing of his body by will by that method, he was highly interested in various measures of sanitation, *e. g.*, in smoke abatement, disposal of city refuse by fire, pure and unlimited water supply, housing of the poor, etc.