

John Turnbull - As I remember him by John Bachynsky.

A personal tribute to a leading figure in Canadian pharmacy

John Turnbull shaped pharmacy in Canada for 25 years and has left a vivid footprint in history.

John Turnbull passed away on 10 December 2010. We do not have a resume of his extensive and varied career and the obituary that was published is woefully thin on his pharmacy accomplishments. To recognize his contributions to the profession I will try to describe some of his activities that I have participated in or noted from various sources. Most of the following is from my recollection and may not be historically accurate in some respects.

I first introduced to John Turnbull by Dean Wes McAulay of the University of Saskatchewan about 1960 at a CPhA conference, just after I graduated. As I recall it was about the time that Sir Hugh Linstead was invited from Britain to take part in the conference and give his views on the changes in pharmacy throughout the Commonwealth. Sir Hugh was the president of the British Pharmaceutical Society and a member of Parliament. He was an exceptional leader and his visit to Canada was remembered by all who met him. Linstead's visit to Canada likely took place due to Turnbull's active involvement in the Commonwealth Pharmaceutical Association.

In the 1960's CPhA was a federation of licensing bodies as well as an umbrella organization with virtually all pharmacy groups affiliated with it. This meant that there were committees to deal with; pharmacy economics, a royal commission on health services, PEBC, by-laws to incorporate new organizations such as the Canadian Society of Governmental Pharmacists, a building committee for the Canadian Institute of Pharmacy, American and international meetings, drug legislation, budgets, publishing CPS and the CPJ along with a Scientific journal, etc.

CPhA, and more accurately, John Turnbull were committed to producing a Compendium of Pharmaceuticals and Specialties and this was done in collaboration with Dean Norman Hughes of the University of Toronto.. The important aspect of this publication was that it had an editorial board that enabled it to include professional information and not just the product monograph as appeared in the Vademecum International (VI), the then current publication supported by the pharmaceutical industry. The first edition of the Compendium was printed in 1960. For the first few years there was only a slow uptake of the new reference book but it gradually took over the market and has become a major benefit to practising pharmacists.

My encounters with Turnbull on a number of issues continued during my teaching at the University of Saskatchewan 1962-64. I had recently completed my M.Sc. in Philadelphia and during that time came to know many of the American leaders in pharmacy, people that Turnbull had been dealing with. This continuing communication was a tribute to his extensive networking with pharmacists, particularly those who were demonstrating some leadership. When I joined the Department of National Health and Welfare in 1967 I began an active collaboration with Turnbull on a wide variety of pharmacy issues and became an informal channel of information on federal government activity. As well as working in the Research and Statistics Directorate I was also appointed as the national consultant in hospital pharmacy and established close contact with

the Executive Director of Canadian Society of Hospital Pharmacists, Donna Shaw. During this period Turnbull was working closely with the Department of National Health and Welfare. The Drugs Directorate had regular meetings with the Registrars of Pharmacy and John Turnbull helped organize and follow up on the meetings. He was selected by the Department to chair a committee to deal with the problem of accidental poisoning of children by acetylsalicylic acid tablets. At the time there were several fatalities and a national effort to deal with this was set in place. One major advance under Bill Wilkinson, a Windsor pharmacist, was the development of child resistant safety closures.

His involvement with international pharmacy was evident in his invitation to the FIP executive to meet in Toronto during the CPhA conference in Toronto about 1967. He personally entertained the group at his home illustrating his deep personal as well as professional commitment.

The Canadian Institute of Pharmacy was a building on College Street in Toronto across the street from the University of Toronto. It was owned by CPhA and dedicated to the profession. Funds were solicited from various pharmacy groups and contributions of art work depicting pharmacy were incorporated into the building. To fund the building a company was formed and it was directed by a CPhA building Committee on which Turnbull was the key member. This turned out to be an excellent investment and generated enough money when sold to enable CPhA to build a new headquarters in Ottawa.

Since the beginning of CPhA in 1907 there was continual striving for a common standard of pharmacy education and regulation. A major legislative push for this occurred in the early 1960's when some leading pharmacists well known to John Turnbull were in the federal government, particularly in the Senate, and they were able to table a Private Members Bill. The outcome was that a Pharmacy Examining Board was established in 1963 with Turnbull the pro tem Registrar.

With the coming of health insurance CPhA looked into creating a drug benefit insurance company under the copyright logo Pharmacare. The symbol was featured on the cover of CPJ. This is an example of the many bright ideas that the board of an organization comes up with and hands off to the Executive Director to research and implement. At the time Green Shield, a prescription drug benefit program mainly for auto workers in Windsor was being initiated by Bill Wilkinson and it served as a template for CPhA. Interestingly, on a visit to the American Pharmaceutical Association soon afterward I was told that they were planning to purchase a drug benefit company and go into business, but this did not come to pass.

In 1969 CPhA launched the Commission on Pharmaceutical Services to chart a path into the future. It was composed of leading pharmacists and some leaders in the health field and research. The Department of National Health and Welfare was asked to contribute to the support of the Commission and its research but declined to do so. Instead, they offered my services as a consultant to the Commission. This provided an interesting period with frequent visits to Toronto to meet with researchers and some of the Commission members. John Turnbull was instrumental in forming the Commission and organizing its structure and function while Dr. Whit Matthews was the person who guided the day to day activities and wrote the report based on the Commissions deliberations and the research results that emerged from the several studies

commissioned. The final report in 1971 was a useful guide to the CPhA and to various provincial and educational groups. The Commission was an expensive endeavor that was launched, supported and guided to a final published report on a small budget and a lot of work by the staff of CPhA.

In 1974 the CPhA conference was held in Ottawa. As a member of the organizing committee I organized the program and had Marc Lalonde, Minister of National Health, talk on The New Perspective on the Health of Canadians, a blueprint for federal and provincial health planning. This was the first public talk on the subject as the report had just been released (I had worked on the Report). Coincidentally, the Canadian Public Health Association (CPHA) then had him as a speaker and still claim that his first talk was to CPHA. Only it was the other CPhA. This was the only conference in which CPhA had no participation in organizing the program and I know that Turnbull was annoyed that we had gone ahead without discussing it with him beforehand.. Fortunately the program quality was such that he went ahead with it. Communications could have been better. Another recollection of the conference was that we came under fire for a “Wives Program” since some of the female pharmacists had brought their husbands. I believe that this was the last conference that had a “Wives Program”. The Chair of the conference was a woman (Charlotte Witte?) who courageously responded the complaints.

The 1970's was also the time of the LeDain Commission on drug abuse. Although pharmacy was not directly linked to drug abuse the fact that pharmaceuticals were used dragged the profession into the discussion. This required CPhA to prepare a position statement and have people to reply to issues. John Turnbull was often in Ottawa putting out fires.

Up to this time CPhA was an association of pharmacy licensing bodies which obligated their members to be members of CPhA. This arrangement was excellent for CPhA as it gave them a strong financial base and the provinces usually had the Registrar as their representative which provided continuity. I recall Don Cameron, Registrar of Alberta, telling me that he had represented Alberta for twenty years. This was the case for the other provinces as well with Alf Pepper (Sask), Doug Denholm (BC), Vic Robichaud (NB) etc. Over the next few years the Association changed, partly due to the Commission on Pharmaceutical Services) and the provinces discontinuing mandatory membership. This began to pose funding problems for CPhA. A major change was the shift of CPhA into an association of pharmacy provincial professional organizations. Some former organizations, such as CSHP, split off. These were tumultuous times for pharmacy and it took a lot of effort to maintain a coherent, viable organization.

Pharmacy was under fire as well from the noisy campaign to fight the high drug prices of patented brand name products. There was an expectation from the pharmaceutical industry to “explain” the prices to patients. The industry insisted that the provinces enforce the legislation against “substitution” of other brands than the one prescribed. Some physicians stamped their prescription “no substitution”. Gradually provinces began to authorize “product selection” for pharmacists. The former term “substitution” originally derived from substituting one ingredient for another in compounding a prescription. A Royal Commission on Drug Prices was created and CPhA managed to have a pharmacist, Jack Summers, sit on it as an observer or advisor.

Among the many changes buffeting CPhA was the demand that the Association move to Ottawa to facilitate lobbying of the federal government. CSHP had already done this with some internal convulsion as a result. This was a difficult issue for CPhA as the Institute was in Toronto, Turnbull was settled in Toronto and many of the supporters and key people that he worked with were in Toronto. As a first step he established a part time office in Ottawa. I arranged for him to share an office with a consultant that I knew and my wife Lois Bachynsky was a part time employee who arranged meetings, took messages and typed letters. This was reasonably successful and served as a base to develop a plan for a move. Unfortunately he left the organization before that could be done.

It was a shock to Turnbull when the CPhA Executive notified him that they would not be renewing his contract. Up to that point the negotiation of the contract had followed the normal course and there were no serious reservations expressed about his performance. In retrospect it appeared that the underlying issue was the decision of the Board to hire a senior person in the publications section and Turnbull refusing to do so as the organization's funding situation was not adequate for this hiring. Turnbull's view was that he had devoted 25 years to developing the organization and he did not want to see it damaged by improper financial decisions. The board for their part had the authority and responsibility for the organization and wanted to make the decisions. Whatever the facts in the case, it resulted in him leaving CPhA and pharmacists taking sides resulting in strained relations among members which lasted for many years.

Despite Turnbull's extensive network of people in industry and government he found it difficult to find a suitable position after leaving CPhA. The Government of Barbados was planning to establish a drug benefit program and asked him to apply for the position. He did and went to Barbados for a five year period to establish the program. He then began a second term but local pharmacists were now qualified for the position and lobbied government to have a local Director. He had hired a local pharmacist as Assistant Director of the program. The pharmacist was had been sent to the US to get a M.Sc. degree and return to teach. The teaching job was poorly paid and had little to attract it. The politics of the situation, however, was uncomfortable and he stepped down. During this time I was attending meetings of the Americas Region of the Commonwealth Pharmaceutical Association in the Caribbean and had a chance to visit with John. His reputation in the Caribbean was such that a number of consultant companies and countries requested him to work for them which he did in St. Lucia and Belize. The Caribbean job was a mixed blessing. Although a step down in the career ladder, it was also much less stressful and he was able to enjoy life and improve his health by swimming each day from his new home on the beach.

While he was in the Caribbean, I recommended that he be asked to review a Canada International Development Agency (CIDA) project that had been funded for improving pharmacy education in the Caribbean. The Deans of Pharmacy of Canada had obtained a grant of \$50,000 to enable Canadian academic staff to go to the Caribbean and teach a class and mentor a local educator to take over instruction. This endeavor continued for several years and when the

funding was exhausted CIDA put out a proposal to have the project reviewed to see how it had improved education. The proposal to conduct an evaluation was for \$56,000! I recommended Turnbull to do the job and to negotiate a contract. This was done and an excellent positive report was submitted on time for \$16,000.

John was a long time member of the Canadian Academy of the History of Pharmacy and was very helpful in clarifying some historical events in which he had been involved.

In summary, during CPhA's formative years John Turnbull was the right man for the job. He utilized his international links(United States, Commonwealth and FIP) to introduce new ideas and objectives. He steered the organization to initiating the Pharmacy Examining Board of Canada resulting in a national standard for education and the basis of reciprocity among the provinces. He promoted the introduction of the CPS and a strong publication arm which became a financial base for CPhA and improved its professional stature. He created excellent communications with the provinces based on long standing friendship with the registrars. He was a credible lobbyist with the federal government and his advice was often sought informally as well as serving on committees (the registrars met with HPB and Turnbull was a participant). As the administrator of an umbrella organization he was supportive to academics, government pharmacists, industrial pharmacists, pharmacy students, and hospital pharmacists. CPhA was a strong and vibrant organization representing virtually all the profession when he left and his imprint was clear. His contribution to pharmacy needs to be better known.

Note:

I would appreciate any input from members to fill in the gaps and to make corrections so we have a more accurate and comprehensive document to put on the web site.  
Send it to [jbachynsky@pharmacy.ualberta.ca](mailto:jbachynsky@pharmacy.ualberta.ca)