

Walter George Smith

Born: 1844
President: 1892-1895
Died: 1932

Walter George Smith was born in Dublin in 1844. He was the third son of Aquilla Smith, a leading Irish physician of that time, whose books on materia medica were the standard textbooks in use in all of the medical schools. Walter was the older brother of Vincent Arthur Smith, the Indian historian and antiquarian.

Walter Smith received his medical education at Trinity College Dublin, where he had a distinguished career graduating as a First Senior Moderator with a BA and MB, and receiving the Gold Medal in Experimental Science in 1867. He became a Licentiate of the College of Physicians in 1865 and a Fellow in October 1868. He received an MD in 1870. His thesis was on *Modern aspects of therapeutics* in which he urged caution in the use of therapeutics and 'watchful clinical observation' of their effects.

Smith was a demonstrator in anatomy in the School of Physic at Trinity College Dublin until 1879 and was Physician to the Adelaide Hospital for many years. In 1881, he was elected by a ballot among the Fellows of the College of Physicians to the post of King's Professor of Materia Medica and Pharmacy in the School of Physic, Trinity College, a position he took over from his father who had held the post since 1864. He also became Physician to Sir Patrick Dun's Hospital at that time and he held both posts until 1920.

In the College of Physicians, Smith held the post of Censor from 1869-70, 1873-74 and 1879-80. He was Vice President from 1880-81 and President from 1892-95. He was also President of the Royal Academy of Medicine in Ireland. As President of the College and the Academy he would ordinarily have been knighted but he declined that honour. In 1887, Smith acted as examiner for the Irish Conjoint Board and an examiner in Medicine for the Royal Army Medical Corp. He was Physician-in-Ordinary to Earl Cadogan during his Vice-Royalty in Ireland.

Dermatology was an area of special interest to Smith and he established a clinic for diseases of the skin in the Adelaide Hospital. When he moved to Sir Patrick Dun's Hospital, the clinic was taken over by Wallace Beatty and between them they achieved a high standing for Dublin in dermatology, an area that Smith maintained an interest in throughout his career.



Another area of interest to Smith was chemistry and it was said that he was ‘an indefatigable student of chemistry’. In fact, he was an ardent student of chemistry all of his life and, as he withdrew from practice, chemistry became his main intellectual interest. ‘Even in old age, he maintained his interest in chemical studies’¹. Urine testing for albumin, sugar and bile developed in the last sixty years of the nineteenth century but it was a contentious field. Sugar was detected up to 1841 by tasting the urine or spotting on clothing and bile by the staining of linen. The iodine test for bile was known as ‘Smith’s Test’ and he also published on the bismuth test for sugar in the urine.

Smith was an advocate of the more cautious use of the therapeutics that were becoming available for the treatment of diseases and was a proponent of the use of electric currents in the treatment of certain conditions. He was the author of the then well-known ‘Commentary on the British Pharmacopoeia’, ‘Incompatibility and some of its lessons’ and many papers and reports on materia medica and pharmacy. ‘Commentary on the British Pharmacopoeia’ was said by Moorhead in his *Short History of Sir Patrick Dun’s Hospital* to be ‘a masterly exposition of the fallacies into which the careless or ignorant prescriber might be likely to fall; and is at the same time a guide as to how such fallacies may be avoided’². His lectures on the clinical uses of electricity were also published. He was a longstanding member of the University Club.

As a physician, Smith was popular with his patients. He also had a simple and genuine humanity that made him popular with his students, who learnt from his enthusiasm for knowledge and his hatred of sham. Pomposity and pretence angered Smith. He had a gift for lucid explanations which endeared him to his students and colleagues alike. His experience as a physician and his knowledge of chemistry made him an ideal teacher of materia medica.

He married Anna Cathcart in 1873 and they had five children. Smith was widowed in mid-life and his two sons also predeceased him by a few years. Smith died at home in his residence in Merrion Square, Dublin on 16 February 1932, at the age of 88 years, after a period of illness. He was survived by his three daughters. He was still very popular at the time of his death and there was a very large attendance at his funeral.

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¹ Obituary, Medical Press and Circular, 24 February 1932

² Moorhead, Short history of Sir Patrick Dun’s Hospital (Dublin, 1942) 42-3.

