William Stewart Halsted Biography

William Stewart Halsted

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Contents

William Stewart Halsted Biography.....1

Contents.....2

Biography.....3

Biography

William Halsted was born in New York, New York, to a family of successful merchants. While at Yale University he was an indifferent student who became interested in medicine only during his senior year. Halsted received his M.D. from Columbia in 1877 as one of the top ten students in his class. He then studied in Europe and returned to New York as a surgeon in 1880.

In the early 1880s Halsted began experimenting with "conduction anesthesia"--injections of cocaine into nerves in the area to be operated on. While Halsted successfully established neuroregional anesthesia--anesthetization of only parts of the body rather than all of it--he became addicted to cocaine in the process and struggled for several years to free himself of the addiction.

Halsted then moved to Baltimore, Maryland, where in 1890 he became head of surgery at the recently established Johns Hopkins Hospital and Medical School. At Hopkins, Halsted became renowned as a meticulous, studious surgeon. He operated painstakingly slowly and spent many hours in the laboratory studying healing processes. His insistence on operating room cleanliness led to the development of *aseptic* procedures in surgery--keeping germs out rather than killing those that are present. When an antiseptic irritated the hands of his operating room nurse, Halsted ordered rubber gloves for her, and then began wearing sterilized gloves himself. (The nurse, Caroline Hampton, married Halsted.)

Halsted also improved radical operations for hernia and breast cancer and operating techniques for the thyroid gland and blood vessels. His laboratory studies and careful operating methods resulted in much improved healing of surgical wounds. Halsted died in 1922 the day after he underwent surgery for jaundice.