



Dr. Norman MacKenzie (1904-1986)

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Biographical Information: Norman A MacKenzie was President of UBC from 1944-1962.

Summary: MacKenzie, at 92, discusses his early career, the formation of the medical faculty and school, and the obstacles encountered.

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Interview with Dr. Norman MacKenzie on February 12, 1985

Int.: *Dr. MacKenzie, I have some questions listed here. We won't necessarily stick to them but I thought I'd begin with a question concerning why the Medical School took so long to get started. Apparently, there were appeals for a medical school as early as 1915. Why do you think it took so long to get under way?*

N.M.: Well, this again is a long story. My family: my father was a Presbyterian minister and my mother died when I was twelve. We were very close. There were seven children and I was the middle. There were two boys older than me and one boy and three girls younger than me. I began at Dalhousie after having been on the Prairies from 1909 to 1913. We came back in the fall of 1913 and my family (my mother had died, as I say, and my stepmother was a very devout Christian woman: a nurse and whatnot; trained in the General in Montreal) wanted me to go into the Ministry. I had had 4-5 years with horses and cows and bulls and whatnot on the Prairies and four years with a rifle and bayonet in the trenches in France with interludes in hospital and one thing and another. Pneumonia and killers and whatnot, but I survived; but I got the nickname Larry out of my saying as a freshman, You were part of the hazy. You could either sing a song, do a tapdance or be tossed in a blanket. Well, I couldn't tap dance and I knew if I was tossed in a blanket it wouldn't be there when I came down so I opted for singing a song... (tape problem) and I retired in 1962.

Int.: *So you arrived in 1944. Wasn't that right when they were talking about getting a medical school going?*

N.M.: When I came to the University there were three faculties: Arts and Science and Engineering. I had not been there more than a year when we had twelve faculties, I think, because I was one of those characters who believed in development.

Int.: *So what did you think about getting a Faculty of Medicine going?*

N.M.: Medicine was one of the faculties that was very much in demand. Now, the medical profession in the city (or some members of it) were determined that it would be centred round the Vancouver General Hospital downtown. I was determined it would be at the University because I didn't believe you could have a good medical faculty unless it was associated with the other faculties in relation to the university. So we battled that one out.

Int.: *I understand there were reports. Dr. Dolman did a report saying where he felt was a logical place for the Faculty of Medicine to be begun.*

N.M.: One of the opponents of putting the medical faculty at the University was Fritz Strong who was a very determined character and who had a leading role in the profession and in the hospital. He and his colleagues wanted the medical faculty; they were interested in it, all for it, but it must be associated with the Vancouver General Hospital. And that

was no good to me. I insisted it had to be in conjunction with and in relation to the University.

Int.: *So you were in agreement with Dr. Dolman then?*

N.M.: Dolman was very much on my side or I was on his, whichever way you put it. But he was a purist, no halfway measures: all or nothing. As I say, he wanted a medical faculty but he wanted it in relation to the university, under his control. He was also the bacteriologist or something of the kind for the Provincial Government, stationed in Vancouver. An able, brilliant sort of person, a graduate of the University, I think, of London; in any event, one of the English ones.

Int.: *You invited him to do a survey, didn't you, of medical schools in North America.*

N.M.: There was a medical school in Dalhousie, of sorts. My stepmother, with my father sort of backing it up; they wanted me to become a minister, Presbyterian minister, if you please. After four years chasing bulls and horses and whatnot on the Prairies followed by another 4-5 years chasing Germans in France, I decided that I wasn't fit to go into the Church so I refused very firmly. So then my stepmother... [gap]... in Law. It wasn't the Faculty of Law there, it was the Faculty of Arts & Sciences but they had a department in their section that was dealing with Law, and I was a professor in that. The University of New Brunswick in Fredericton – it's in the news these days - so somebody invited me to be their president. This was in a sense a promotion so I accepted and became that. From that I came out to UBC.

Int.: *So you had had experience as a president before coming to the University of British Columbia?*

N.M.: Yes. At that time, UBC was the youngest university in Canada and it was in a new part of the world and interesting and exciting. So they offered me this position as head of the Faculty of Law at UBC and as President of the University. As I say, I had been president of the University of New Brunswick.

Int.: *So were you prepared to be thrown right into all the comings and goings with the beginning of the Faculty of Medicine when you came out here? Were you ready for that?*

N.M.: Well, ready for anything.

Int.: *It seems there were a lot of problems in getting the Faculty of Medicine going. How did you deal with that?*

N.M.: This was a double problem because a group associated with the Vancouver General were determined it was going to be there and I was determined it was going to be on the campus at UBC.

Int.: *One of the things that Dr. Dolman wanted was a hospital built out at the University of British Columbia as well. Why didn't the Government want to put up enough money for that, do you think?*

N.M.: They never did.

Int.: *Did they not have the money?*

N.M.: We worked in huts. As you know, we had three huts when I came here. I hadn't been here long when we had twelve. Twelve faculties, as a matter of fact, because I was younger than I am now. I'm 92 (I think) now but I was relatively young and energetic and full of bumph.

Int.: *You were able to deal with all of the problems you had thrown at you?*

N.M.: I rolled with the punches.

Int.: *How did you come to choose Dr. Weaver as dean of the faculty of Medicine?*

N.M.: Well, again, I had investigated the Canadian possibilities and in consultation with the seniors in the medical faculty, University of Toronto and McGill. They were the only two that were really in the picture. I tried to get the professor of Medicine at UBC now, Bob Kerr...

Int.: *Oh yes.*

N.M.: ... to come out but he wouldn't have any part of it. So having exhausted the possibilities of a Canadian I turned to the US. The recommendation I had was Myron Weaver who was an attractive person of the right age and everything. Being an American didn't make too much difference so we appointed him as the first dean of the Faculty of Medicine at UBC and he accepted that position. He was a very pleasant and active member of our faculty here.

Int.: *What was his role in getting the Faculty of Medicine actually under way?*

N.M.: His? Well, he came up here on the understanding that he was to be dean of a Faculty of Medicine.

Int.: *But there wasn't any Faculty of Medicine, so what did he have to do?*

N.M.: Well, he had to take over when there was one.

Int.: *But did he actually put it together?*

N.M.: No, I put it together, damn it all!

Int.: *So what did you have to do?*

N.M.: I had to find professors, gather them. To all intents and purposes, here we were, the end of the world, isolated by the Rocky Mountains. Canada ends at the Rockies, you know, and BC begins. That's what we had to deal with. So that was that. Myron Weaver came to be the dean of the Faculty of Medicine and proved to be a very able and intelligent person.

Int.: *Did he do a good job?*

N.M.: He did a very good job. I've forgotten why he retired soon, but he went back to Pennsylvania or somewhere there in the East and had another job back there.

Int.: *The dean after him was Dean Patterson? Dean Patterson wasn't there very long. Why didn't he stay?*

N.M.: He died.

Int.: *Dean Patterson? Oh.*

N.M.: In the meantime, I tried to get Rocke Robertson to consider coming but he didn't want it. Then Bob Kerr didn't want it.

Int.: *So what was it actually like starting a medical school with no buildings?*

N.M.: We had nothing.

Int.: *How did they do it?*

N.M.: We built a few huts.

Int.: *So they just worked out of the huts. Was it extremely difficult?*

N.M.: No, nothing's difficult if you're having fun.

Int.: *(laughing) So everybody was enjoying themselves, were they?*

N.M.: Oh yes. Dolman was very able, very intelligent, and very difficult. He wanted perfection. And all this hit-and-miss business of mine was anathema to him. However, it was the only possible way of getting anything anywhere.

Int.: *Why do you think it was the only possibility?*

N.M.: He was a purist and nothing but the best. And he couldn't have that in huts. But I said you could certainly have anything in huts.

Int.: *I think he wanted to wait to start the medical school. Do you think that wasn't a very good idea?*

N.M.: Well, you would lose opportunities if you waited.

Int.: *What kinds of opportunities?*

N.M.: Opportunities to have a Faculty of Medicine.

Int.: *You don't think it would have happened otherwise? You don't think it would have been possible if you had waited?*

N.M.: Always possible but not wise in the circumstances, at least we didn't think so. So we built a couple more huts on the Main Mall, attractive little huts and put Dolman in one of them and some other people in Medicine in there. We had a full-fledged medical faculty.

Int.: *How did it work, having the school split between the Vancouver General Hospital and the University? Did that work out well?*

N.M.: No, because the personnel wanted everything at the Vancouver General, particularly Fritz Strong, and I wanted everything at the University.

Int.: *But there was a compromise made which, I presume, satisfied most people*

N.M.: It didn't satisfy anybody but it made a medical faculty possible. It was on the campus, which was my insistence. It became a part of the university, one of the other faculties. As I said, when I came here there were three and, within the year I think it was, we had twelve faculties. So this was the kind of situation which I found myself in.

Int.: *Why was there such a divergence of opinion between the downtown doctors and the University?*

N.M.: The downtown people wanted to be in control and they couldn't if it was out here; and we wanted it on the campus because we wanted to be in control. By putting our angles in we were able to do that. So the Medical School is on the campus.

Int.: *There is also a hospital on the campus now. Why do you think the Government didn't want to put the money out to build a hospital?*

N.M.: It costs money.

Int.: *Just too much money? But think of what it costs now compared to what it would have cost then.*

N.M.: I know, my dear, but... (laughs) I performed a miracle in getting from Mr. Hart, the premier at that time, the \$5-million to found - actually, to underwrite - the University and start a medical faculty. He was a very genial person. He and Professor Buchanan, who was Mathematics, played golf and I played golf after a fashion. And we got Mr. Hart, who had to come to Vancouver frequently anyway, engaged in some golf matches - on the golf course at Shaughnessy, I think it was - and there we got this incredible amount of \$5 million, just unbelievable, that enabled us to get going and we have never looked back. So that was that.

Int.: *Do you have any idea what the students were like who enrolled in that first year, in 1950 when it first opened? Were they a good group of students?*

N.M.: Oh, first rate. Couldn't wish for better. They were the cutting edge of the new world, a new development; exciting, interesting, They were founding fathers, as it were. They were all thrilled.

Int.: *Were they well prepared, do you think? Was their pre-medical training adequate?*

N.M.: Good? Yes, very good.

Int.: *Because there was quite a lot of...*

N.M.: Opposition from the downtown profession. No doubt about that. But you had to be hard-nosed about this and make the best of it.

Int.: *How would you compare the first students to the students that are enrolling now?*

N.M.: Oh, none of those problems any more. We're the only one, UBC. If you want to be a doctor you've got to be a graduate of the Faculty of Medicine. We are the only one: UBC.

Int.: *How did the Faculty of Medicine get along with the other faculties that were already in existence? Was there any conflict or were they amiable?*

N.M.: Except for money.

Int.: *Money always seemed to be the crux of things. Why was that?*

N.M.: Well, there wasn't enough for anybody.

Int.: *And I guess a medical faculty is always very expensive to run anyhow.*

N.M.: It's expensive; swallows up a lot of the income. But if you wanted a medical faculty you had to spend some money on it, which we did.

Int.: *But the other faculties were basically in agreement. They wanted it too?*

N.M.: No, they didn't squeal too much. We attempted to do the best we could by them too.

Int.: *Was there much of a struggle in the beginning with transportation as well as accommodation?*

N.M.: Out there? Well, buses...

Int.: *They were adequate?*

N.M.: ...and cars.

Int.: *It wasn't really too much different from what it is now.*

N.M.: No, they put up with that and still do.

Int.: *Were research or academic activities curtailed as well by the accommodations?*

N.M.: I would say 'No'.

Int.: *You think people managed to work within the limits?*

N.M.: Not only managed but were stimulated.

Int.: *Did you have very much involvement in the Faculty of Medicine after it got going? Or did they carry on themselves?*

N.M.: No. They have always been a good part of the university community.

Int.: *Did you actually have much to do with them afterwards?*

N.M.: I used to say that any week that passed that I didn't have five meetings about the medical faculty was a wasted week (laughter); very true. So I had a great deal to do with it on the basis of my one year in Medicine at Dalhousie.

Int.: *How did you decide to use the money that was available from the Government?*

N.M.: There were so many things you could use it on.

Int.: *Exactly...*

N.M.: It was a question of deciding what you could do and what you couldn't do. Medicine and its faculty required a lion's share of what was available, naturally. So Engineering and Arts and Science and whatnot were more or less static for a period while these other faculties got under way.

Int.: *So you felt the Faculty of Medicine, for instance, took priority at this particular time?*

N.M.: Yes.

Int.: *...and another faculty would take priority at a later time?*

N.M.: Then we had Forestry too, as well as Engineering and the others.

Int.: *Was the money raised just totally from the Government? Or were there any other ways of raising money?*

N.M.: We got a minimum amount from the public.

Int.: *What was public opinion at this time about starting a medical school?*

N.M.: Mixed.

Int.: *Mixed? They weren't all in favour of it or all against it?*

N.M.: No, they weren't against it but, in large, they were behind in backing us and rather pleased at the opportunity of being involved in this new venture.

Int.: *What kind of expectations do you think the public had? Do you think they had any specific expectations?*

N.M.: Out of the new faculty in development? Only an enhancement of the reputation of the institution and the opportunities for their own young fellows and young girls in this. As I say, we were the youngest, newest, and the farthest on the Pacific Rim in Christendom.

Int.: *Sort of a controversial question: Do you think the medical faculty opened too soon to students?*

N.M.: No.

Int.: *You don't think it would have served any purpose to wait?*

N.M.: If they wanted to get going, get going.

Int.: *I gather most people agreed with you?*

N.M.: Except these hard-nosed characters who were always insisting on being in control at the Vancouver General.

Int.: *What about the experts that were brought in to give their opinions, as advisors? What effect did they have on the final decisions?*

N.M.: I think they gave us a boost, supported us.

Int.: *Most of them suggested that the school should all be at UBC, didn't they? They wanted the whole school at UBC, a hospital and everything. So how did a compromise come to be arrived at, having part of it at the Vancouver General and part of it at the University?*

N.M.: *Well, we got everything that we really needed. We have a hospital and we have a Dental faculty.*

Int.: *Now, yes.*

N.M.: They came in due course without too much opposition.

Int.: *It's all worked out quite well, really. So you would feel, if you were asked what your opinion of the medical faculty is now, what would you say? Is it a positive force?*

N.M.: Yes, very much so... school of 4 or 5 years' duration, which meant that, times six, 240 or so medical students, which wasn't too bad.

Int.: *No, for a new school too. What was the relationship between UBC and the Vancouver General? Was it a good relationship?*

N.M.: No. They were always of the opinion that everything should be in the Vancouver General...

Int.: *And that wasn't ever ironed out?*

N.M.: No, but we wanted it in relation to the other faculties and departments and facilities.

Int.: *Did the Faculty of Medicine always control beds at the Vancouver General? Did they have full control of the beds there?*

N.M.: Yes, I guess so.

Int.: *How did the dean react to the hospital practitioners, Dean Weaver? Did he manage to deal with them fairly well? He didn't run into too many problems?*

N.M.: No, not insuperable ones.

Int.: *You are going to run into problems, no matter what, I guess. (Pause.) What were the expectations that you had about the medical faculty?*

N.M.: That we would provide the necessary medical personnel for the Province and up country. One of the problems, of course, was to persuade young, ambitious graduates to leave the Vancouver area. And their wives were no help to them in that regard, I assure

you; they just couldn't face the bush for an indefinite period so they would not be enthusiastic about being pioneered off onto the fringes.

Int.: *Do you think this was met? Do you think the School of Medicine has put out doctors into the 'wilderness' of British Columbia? Do you think that expectation of yours was met?*

N.M.: I don't know...

Int.: *I guess it's hard to tell too. What specific things do you think were retarding the progress of medical education in B.C. in the late '40s because it seemed that there was a lot of talk for a long time before things actually happened. Why?*

N.M.: Well, again, the difference of opinion as to where it should be and the very serious question as to where the money was going to come from and how much. It was going to be expensive.

Int.: *Would you like some tea and toast?*

N.M.: Oh, no thanks. Thank you, dear.

Int.: *I've thought of another question: The report that Dr. Dolman did, then the subsequent report that Dr. Strong did, were done quite close to 1950. I think they were done in 1948? Why weren't they done earlier? Did people just not think of it?*

N.M.: I'm sure they thought of it. Members of the medical profession, particularly those who were ambitious.

Int.: *But if they wanted to start a medical school it would have seemed logical to have done a survey much earlier than was performed.*

N.M.: Well, I think they did one of sorts back in the early '20s. I don't know if you will find records of that or not. It seems to me there was a story that if we got a medical school under way - this was back in '20, '21, '22, '23 there, somebody would come up with a handsome sum of money. Well, we didn't get the thing going and the money never appeared anyway and everything was put on hold until after I came out here.

Int.: *I wonder why they put it on hold then? I think it was 1925 the Rockefeller Foundation offered money if someone else could meet their...*

N.M.: Well, it was either '21 or '22 or '25 - somewhere in the '20s. I've never seen the hard cash.

Int.: *That might have been a reason why it didn't get going. The downtown practitioners, Dr. Strong and other people in the medical association, didn't seem to start out wanting a medical school all at the Vancouver General Hospital. They did towards the end. What made them change their minds?*

N.M.: They didn't.

Int.: *No?*

N.M.: No, I didn't change my mind.

Int.: *No, their minds.*

N.M.: I know. They were faced with an accomplished fact, that we were going ahead with a medical faculty and school on the campus and they would have to be content with that.

Int.: *Were they?*

N.M.: Most unhappy.

Int.: *Could you tell me how the clinical appointees were monitored as far as their time was concerned? They spent some time in their own practice and some time teaching at UBC. How did they handle that?*

N.M.: Well, again, they were faced with facts and they adjusted to them.

Int.: *What was their role?*

N.M.: To make the limited contribution they could in the circumstances.

Int.: *And most of them were actually teaching out at UBC? What about Dean McCreary?*

N.M.: He was a great guy, even though he did have matrimonial problems. He was most attractive with women as well as men.

Int.: *And did he do a good job as dean?*

N.M.: Oh, excellent. He was first-rate, capable and intelligent.

Int.: *What about Dean Patterson? Did he do a good job for the short time he was there?*

N.M.: Patterson? Oh, he was just a dream that passed in the night.

Int.: *He wasn't there long enough...?*

N.M.: He was never really interested in the level of opportunities that were offered him here. He had come from Cleveland, I think it was, and he was unhappy with the possibilities - or non-possibilities - of this situation here. I'd almost forgotten we had him for a while.

Int.: *It didn't really meet his expectations then. How was the planning done for the School between 1947 and 1950? How did you plan departments?*

N.M.: By guess and by God. Do the obvious things that were necessary and hope for the best.

Int.: *Can you think of any little personal anecdotes, special little stories of things that happened, that you can remember? It's quite a long time ago, I know.*

N.M.: It's not that so much as there was so much happening. Well, the time was fascinating because we were pioneers in the true sense. As I said, Canada stopped with the Rockies and beyond that was wilderness, the Pacific Rim...

Int.: *You seem to have recruited a lot of people from Toronto and California and other parts of North America, so people were willing to come.*

N.M.: It was exciting and an adventure and we were treading virgin ground.

Int.: *That's always appealing to certain people. So you really didn't have problems getting faculty?*

N.M.: There was a problem getting a dean. As I say, I tried to get several distinguished people from Toronto and McGill but they couldn't be shaken loose. So that's why we got Weaver.

Int.: *You were pleased with his appointment?*

N.M.: Yes, he was a genial soul and had a good reputation. He was second-in-command or something or other of the institution he was with. We liked him.

Int.: *Did he get along well with the other faculty members?*

N.M.: Oh yes. He got along with everybody. He was really a very good colleague. I liked working with him, giving him as much support as I could, financially and otherwise.

Int.: *Well, shall we stop for today. I think we've been talking for a long time. You must be getting tired. (Pause.) A little?*

N.M.: I'd forgotten you were coming at all.

Int.: *I'm sorry about that.*

N.M.: No, you shouldn't be.