Dr. John H. Gibbon, Jr. and Jefferson's Heart-Lung Machine: Commemoration of the World's First Successful Bypass Surgery

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On May 6, 1953 at Jefferson Medical College Hospital, Dr. John Heysham Gibbon, Jr., his staff, and with the help of his latest-designed heart-lung machine, “Model II,” closed a very serious septal defect between the upper chambers of the heart of eighteen-year-old Cecelia Bavolek. This was the first successful intercar- diac surgery of its kind performed on a human patient. Mr. Bovelek was connected to the heart-lung machine which helped Gibbon perfect. The experimental patients (dogs) had a survival rate of about 90%. After this surgery Dr. Gibbon reportedly felt, “extreme exhilaration, relief, and joy that the patient had done well.” One wonders if he was also feeling the surreal state of anticlimax, having simultaneously ended twenty-three crucial minutes, the patient totally depended on critical functions. “Jack” Gibbon did not follow this epoch-making event by holding an international press conference or by swiftly publishing his achievements in a major medical journal. He accepted the JMC post in January 1946. Gibbon received accolades and awards, continued his private practice and continued reaching at JMC until his retirement in 1967 as Samuel D. Gross Professor of Surgery. Although he was criticized for “abandoning” further use of the heart-lung machine after the deaths of the two children in 1953, his friends recognized that it was very much in his character not to put humans at risk, even when faced with the prospect of losing his life-long project to others. A daily cigarette smoker, like many of his contemporaries, Dr. John H. Gibbon, Jr., suffered a fatal heart attack at the age of 69 on February 5, 1973 while playing tennis.

Further Readings:


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**Commemoration of the World’s First Successful Bypass Surgery**

**“Many are the struts I’ve had**

**With the mortals here,**

**Their bodies offered to my trust,**

**To cut and sew and maybe cure.”**

—John Heysham Gibbon, Jr., 1960