



G. Brock Chisholm, MD

In the immediate aftermath of World War II, a new commitment to international cooperation helped create the United Nations and one of its greatest agencies the World Health Organization (WHO), which has since been at the forefront of efforts to promote health and well-being worldwide. Canadian Major General Dr. G. Brock Chisholm, one of the founders of WHO, served as its first Director General from 1948 until 1953, when the world was struggling to recover from the devastation of war and the challenges of cholera in Egypt, malaria in Greece and Sardinia, as well as tuberculosis and urgent needs for sanitation, child and maternal care, and public health worldwide.

Dr. Chisholm, who began his medical career as a physician in private practice, effectively became “Doctor to the World,” with a practice embracing 3 billion people, helping build the cooperative international institutions that sustain the world today.

Born in Oakville, Ontario in 1896, Dr. Chisholm enlisted as a soldier in 1915, serving in France where he was twice wounded and decorated for heroism. He later earned his MD from the University of Toronto in 1924, interned in England specializing in psychiatry, and continued his studies in children’s mental health at Yale, where he embraced the impact of the social determinants of health. Establishing Toronto’s first private psychiatric practice in the height of the Depression, Dr. Chisholm would accept ‘payment in kind’ from his patients who could not pay in cash.

During the Second World War, he served as Director General of Medical Services, the Canadian Army’s highest ranking medical position, and in 1944, was named first Canadian Deputy Minister of Health. In 1946, Dr. Chisholm declared in a WHO planning meeting that health should be defined as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.” This enlightened summary is now enshrined in the WHO’s constitution.

Dr. Chisholm’s career was not without controversy. He was a fiercely independent thinker with strong views on children’s education and social justice, and he was sometimes accused, at a time when such accusations were common, of communist sympathies for his passionate internationalism and his advocacy of secular scientific reason. He was a profound critic of the dangers of nuclear war, and one of the first to warn about industrial pollution and uncontrolled population growth.

Dr. Chisholm had seen war firsthand, as a soldier in the First World War, and as a medical administrator in the Second. He knew the devastation and cruelty of war as both a common soldier and a high-ranking officer. He held considerable power from 1945 to 1953, and he used that power to promote one of the most durable and positive international organizations the world has ever known. He believed in the possibility of enlightened international cooperation, and he helped to achieve it for all of us.