



Robert Noble, MD PhD

After completing his studies abroad, Dr. Robert Noble returned to Canada to work with Dr. J.B. Collip at McGill University and began research on endocrine-related cancers. In 1947, Noble became Associate Director of the Collip Medical Research Laboratory at The University of Western Ontario, and it was here that Dr. Noble made his groundbreaking discovery of "vinblastine". While not a cure, in combination with other drugs, vinblastine had a major impact on controlling the growth of a number of different types of cancers and it was the first major advance in chemotherapy originating in Canada.

The vinblastine story was a serendipitous one closely associated with diabetes. In 1952, Dr. Noble received an envelope from his brother Dr. Clark Noble containing 25 leaves from the Madagascar periwinkle plant (*Vinca Rosea*). It was sent from one of Clark's patients in Jamaica, who had said that a periwinkle tea was being used in Jamaica for diabetes treatment when insulin was unavailable. As Clark Noble was no longer active in research, he sent the leaves to his brother. The leaves had little effect on blood sugar levels, but had surprising inhibitory effects on the white blood cell count which suggested that a periwinkle leaf extract might be useful as a cancer treatment, particularly for leukemia.

In 1954, Dr. Charles T. Beer joined Dr. Noble's research team and by 1958 was successful in isolating and purifying a potent alkaloid extract from the leaves that they called "vinblastine". Working with the Eli Lilly Co., a small supply of vinblastine was prepared for clinical trials, the first of which occurred in 1959 at the Princess Margaret Hospital in Toronto with very dramatic results.

Dr. Noble was a skilled and ingenious experimentalist who has received numerous awards for research work described by some 200 published articles. In 1960, he was appointed Director of Cancer Research and Professor of Physiology at the University of British Columbia. Upon his retirement in 1975, he became an Honorary Member, Division of Cancer Endocrinology at the BC Cancer Agency, where he continued his research until his death in 1990.

Dr. Noble and Dr. Charles Beer were jointly nominated and inducted into The Canadian Medical Hall of Fame.