

## June Speaker Event

### James FitzGerald, When Canada Led the World in Public Health

James spoke to us about how his grandfather, Dr. John Gerald “Gerry” FitzGerald (1882-1940) was in the lead in transforming Canada from being disdained as “a colonial backwater in medicine into the world’s leader in public health” while trying to cope with depression. As the first head of Connaught Laboratories and also of the University of Toronto’s School of Hygiene, Gerry revolutionized Canadian health care through the bold new concept of high-quality, low-cost, domestically developed biomedical products rather than imports, distributed free to all citizens, making it possible finally for the poor to get coverage, too. “It was radical, unprecedented anywhere in the world. He was way ahead of Tommy Douglas regarding universal health care,” James said proudly.

In addition to talking about his grandfather’s accomplishments James had another purpose: to show how depression can affect anyone. Gerry, tragically, committed suicide, at the age of just 58, at the height of his fame. “Depression is the number one mental health affliction today,” James said. “There’s a lot to be depressed about. The suicide rate amongst doctors is twice that of the general population. Stress is a cause but so is the stigma still attached to depression. Doctors, as with my grandfather, are expected to suffer silently.

“Brilliance and disturbance often are intertwined. The view was that my grandfather had the world by the tail, so why destroy himself? He was judged to be a failure. Male vulnerability was not acceptable. People had to repress their feelings. It wasn’t realized that emotional problems aren’t weaknesses, not something that should be repressed and denied. There’s still a failure of listening to people.”

James said his family “never discussed Grandfather. It was as if he never existed.” So, when James, a journalist and author, decided to write a biography of Gerry he became a “detective,” tracking down sources including letters written by Gerry and people who had known him. His book, *What Disturbs Our Blood: A Son’s Quest to Redeem the Past*, published in 2010, won the Writers’ Trust Non-Fiction Prize.

In 1913, with \$3,000 from his wife’s dowry [ she was an heiress] Gerry opened a small lab, setting out to eradicate diphtheria, the scourge of the day, with anti-toxin obtained from horses. Horses are capable of providing large amounts of a number of types of anti-toxins. Impressed by his success, the University of Toronto put him in charge of its new “anti-toxin” Connaught Laboratories in 1914. He had a new, big facility built at Dufferin and Steeles, opened in 1917.

He had Connaught develop anti-toxins and serums against tetanus, meningitis, typhoid fever and smallpox and funded the development of life-saving insulin by a team led by doctors Frederick Banting and Charles Best. “There would be no insulin without FitzGerald,” Best said. Gerry revamped U of T’s department of medicine and with money from the Rockefeller Foundation founded the university’s School of Hygiene. He advocated holistic health care.

In 1989 Connaught was acquired by Sanofi Pasteur, a global pharmaceuticals firm headquartered in France. It calls the Dufferin and Steeles complex the Connaught Campus and, as James noted, created an onsite museum commemorating the early days, including his grandfather. UWCNY members went on a group tour a few years ago.

*Susan Goldenberg*