

Sir Robert William Philip (1857–1939)

The world has good reason to be thankful that Sir Robert William Philip, on seeing the tubercle bacillus for the first time, immediately grasped the importance of Robert Koch's discovery and, secondly, that he had the courage and confidence not to take the advice given to him by a professor of medicine when Philip told him of his determination to make tuberculosis (TB) his life's work: 'Don't think of such a thing. Phthisis is worn to a thin thread. The subject is exhausted.' The year was 1883.

Robert Koch (1843–1910), working in Berlin, was already famous for having discovered *B. anthracis* in 1877. In 1882, before Ziehl and Neelson described their famous stain, Koch managed to stain and see the tubercle bacillus for the first time. The following year Koch would discover *Vibrio cholerae*, but it was for his work on TB that he was awarded the 1905 Nobel Prize for Medicine. Philip was doing postgraduate study in Vienna, read Koch's paper and saw the stained bacillus for himself.

The youngest son of a Free Church of Scotland minister in Glasgow, Philip was schooled at Edinburgh's Royal High School. He studied medicine in Edinburgh, graduating MB, CM in 1882, after which he pursued postgraduate studies, particularly embryology and gynaecology, in Berlin, Vienna and other European centres. Within four years of returning home he had added MD Edin to his qualifications.

Committing himself to TB was a bold decision. Philip knew what a killer the disease was, striking young and old and leaving countless children orphans. It is said that in the mid-19th century TB was responsible for one in seven deaths in Europe and North America. Philip had seen its many manifestations in Scotland, particularly where living conditions were poor, ventilation non-existent and small tenement rooms housed whole families.



Portrait of Sir Robert by Sir James Guthrie PRSA, RSW (1859–1930), a painter of landscapes, genre and portraits from Greenock who was President of the Royal Scottish Academy from 1902 to 1919. (Oil on canvas, 107 cm x 80 cm)

Philip was well aware that TB must be infectious and now, using Ziehl-Neelsen stain, could see for himself the offending organism. He must also have been painfully aware that no medication existed to hold back the disease. All that could be recommended was as much rest as possible, fresh air, ideally in Switzerland, and a healthy diet with abundant fruit – a prescription beyond the means of most patients and their families. Although artificial pneumothorax was first introduced in 1881 by Forlanini, it was 1943 before streptomycin was available, followed by isoniazid and para-aminosalicylic acid in the mid-20th century.

To deal with the ambulant sufferers and the tracing of contacts, Philip opened the world's first dispensary for TB in Bank Street, Edinburgh, in 1887. With the help of his wife, Elizabeth Motherwell of County Sligo, whom he married in 1888, and some friends, he established Edinburgh's Royal Victoria Hospital as a hospital for the more advanced cases in 1894. A sanatorium was built on the southeast corner of the city and nearby was a farm to supply the healthy

produce its patients needed in addition to the fresh air Philip was certain would aid in the defeat of the bacillus. This co-ordinated system was unique and soon proved as effective as any regimen could before the days of tuberculostatics. By 1912 Philip's pattern of an integrated TB service had been adopted by the government. The first such service in England, starting as a TB dispensary, had opened at Paddington as a result of the efforts of an Edith McGaw, destined to be Philip's second wife after Elizabeth died in 1937. Sadly Philip and Edith both died in 1939, a year after marrying.

In 1890 Philip was appointed to the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh as a chest physician and in 1917, four years after being knighted, he took up the world's first chair in tuberculosis at Edinburgh University. Elected FRCP Edin in 1887, he was College president from 1918 to 1922 and curator of the College's research laboratory in Forrest Road from 1923 to 1937. In 1927 he was president of the British Medical Association, and in 1933 was elected a Fellow of the London College.

Some of Philip's contemporaries commented that he was a better teacher than a diagnostician, but all were agreed that he was a gracious host, a diplomat whether speaking English, French or German, and an epicurean. Today we may recall that his publications included *Selections of writings* (1911), *The control and eradication of tuberculosis: a series of international studies* (1911), *The actual position of tuberculosis today* (1923) and *Collected papers on tuberculosis* (1937).

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FURTHER READING

- *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*
- Craig WS. *The History of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh*. Oxford: Blackwell Scientific Publications; 1976.
- *Sir RW Philip: Memories of his Friends and Pupils*. London: National Association for the Prevention of Tuberculosis; 1957.