The Passing of a Giant

Dr. Robert Elgie 1929 - 2013

By Dan Revington*

Ontario’s workers’ compensation community was saddened to learn of the passing of Dr. Robert Elgie on April 3, 2013.

Dr. Elgie was a great man. “Dr Bob”, as he was affectionately known, was well known to many members of the Workers’ Compensation Section. He, along with Gary Newhouse, was the first recipient of our Section’s Ron Ellis Award in 1999.

Dr. Elgie graduated from Osgoode Hall Law School as silver medalist, president of the student council, and class valedictorian. He graduated from the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Ottawa, and then trained as a neurosurgeon. He was a Professor of Neurosurgery at Queen’s University, and Chief Neurosurgeon at Scarborough General Hospital. Elected to the Provincial Legislature in 1977, Dr. Elgie was Minister of Labour from 1978-82, where his long-term impact on workers’ compensation began.

The September 1999 Workers’ Compensation Section Newsletter reported the remarks which Ron Ellis made in presenting the Ron Ellis Award to Dr. Elgie. Ron described Dr. Elgie as “the receptive ear injured worker advocates eventually found”. It was Dr. Elgie who appointed Paul Weiler to study the workers’ compensation system in Ontario, and who ensured the government adopted Weiler’s reforms. One of the reforms was the creation of the Workers’ Compensation Appeals Tribunal (now WSIAT), and Dr. Elgie appointed Ron to be the first Tribunal Chair in 1985. Ron recalled that the Tribunal had few friends in its first few years, but that Dr. Elgie “stood fast as a friend of the Tribunal concept”.

Dr. Elgie was subsequently appointed Chair of the Ontario Workers’ Compensation Board (now WSIB), a post he held for six years. After that he went on to lead the Nova Scotia Workers’ Compensation Board for four years, and created the Department of Health Law at Dalhousie Law School where he was a full Professor.

Those who knew Dr. Elgie were impressed with his intelligence, his natural ability to connect with people, and his sense of humour. After the Conservative government was defeated and Dr.
Elgie was appointed to the Board, he liked to start his public speeches to employer organizations by saying that he was Chair of the Board because of all the ex-Conservatives in the audience.

Dr. Elgie was admired and respected by both the injured worker community and the employer community. He has left a lasting legacy of achievement in workers’ compensation in Ontario.

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