

Biography - Francis Percival Sandes

by John Carmody

Francis Percival Sandes (1876-1945), surgeon, was born at Ipswich, Queensland, on 21 January 1876, son of Irish parents James Sands, police constable, and his wife Annie Jane, née Goudy. He was educated at Brisbane Grammar School and, as an exhibitioner, studied medicine at the University of Sydney (M.B., Ch.M., 1899; M.D., 1903), where he won the Slade prize for chemistry and physics (1894) and the [Levey](#) and [Renwick](#) scholarships (1895). He held several hospital appointments and graduated M.D. with first-class honours and the University medal in surgery in 1903: his thesis concerned ovarian function in the native marsupial cat. On 19 February 1902 at Molong he had married Alice May Black, a nurse.

Entering general practice, Sandes became demonstrator in anatomy at the university and (in 1907) honorary assistant surgeon at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital. He spent most of 1910 studying in Europe and Britain and set up practice in Macquarie Street upon his return in 1911. He lectured in surgery at the university from 1914 and held the [McCaughey](#) chair of surgery (1921-28). Although a part-time position it was the first surgical chair in Australia. In 1927, pending the appointment of [Henry Chapman](#), Sandes was acting director of cancer research, and was director of cancer treatment (1928-35) in the institute founded by the university after a successful public appeal.

A councillor from 1911, he was president of the State branch of the British Medical Association in 1919-20, a director of the Australasian Medical Publishing Co. Ltd (publisher of the *Medical Journal of Australia*) in 1923-27, and a founder and councillor of the (Royal) Australasian College of Surgeons in 1927; in Sydney, his influence was considered a useful counterpoise to the Melbourne dominance of the college.

Opinions diverge widely about his contribution to the study and practice of surgery. His opponents held that he took the chair because, unlike the leading surgeons, he had the time for it, and asserted that his effect on the university and the profession at large was minuscule: certainly, he published very little. Even his critics conceded that he did establish the department of surgery. His admirers described him as a man with an original mind who was inclined to experiment in his procedures.

With [H. M. Moran](#) Sandes had taken an early interest in the therapeutic potential of radiation, and, ingenious at inserting radium needles, advocated the combination of surgery and radiotherapy. As early as 1925 he proposed a department of radiotherapy at R.P.A.H. Honorary consulting surgeon at that hospital from 1936, he returned during World War II at the request of ([Sir](#)) [Herbert Schlink](#), as 'resident consultant'. He was also medical officer to the Sydney Municipal Council in 1940-43.

Some of his behaviour must have been considered unacceptably eccentric. Sandes was a motor-cycle enthusiast all his life (and dressed appropriately, as a contemporary cartoon by [Lionel Lindsay](#) depicts). He kept a cycle in the hallway of his City Road home and used to start it there, producing a circle of oil which covered carpet, walls and ceiling. His personal warmth and charm, sense of humour, keen intellect and wide scientific knowledge were acknowledged and valued. He was considered 'almost unrivalled as a raconteur'.

Sandes died of chronic nephritis on 16 May 1945 and was cremated with Presbyterian forms. His wife, two daughters and two sons (both serving with the Australian Imperial Force) survived him. A portrait by [B. E. Minns](#) is held by Royal Prince Alfred Hospital.

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