



James Dale Van Buskirk (1881–1969): His Life-long Devotion to Medicine and Missions in Korea

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After graduating from medical school in the United States, James Dale Van Buskirk came to Korea as a missionary and dedicated his entire life to missionary work, medical education, and medical research until the time he left Korea. He also devoted himself selflessly to the Korean people and Severance Union Medical College (SUMC). Therefore, an in-depth examination of his life journey would be a very valuable endeavor.

EARLY LIFE IN AMERICA

James Dale Van Buskirk was born on August 28, 1881, in Lucerne, Putnam, Missouri, United States, as the eldest son among six siblings (three sons and three daughters) to his father, Benjamin Franklin Van Buskirk (1857–1937), and mother, Margaret Jane Maxwell (1861–1901).¹ He was a rural school teacher before entering the University Medical College in Kansas City, Missouri, where he spent 4 years as a medical student.

In 1906, he graduated from the medical school and earned his Doctor of Medicine (M.D.) degree. During part of his medical school years and for 1 year after graduation, he worked as

a histology instructor at his alma mater. While in medical school, he became involved in the student YMCA and the missionary association, which sparked his interest in overseas missions. After completing his internship at hospitals in Kansas City following graduation from medical school, he was sent to Korea as a medical missionary for the United Methodist Church in 1908.

MISSIONARY WORKS IN GONGJU

On August 30, 1908, James Dale Van Buskirk departed for Korea aboard the ocean liner SS Minnesota from Seattle, Washington. At that time, he left behind his fiancée, Miss Harriet Winifred Evans (1883–1983). A year later, she reunited with him in Korea.²

On September 23, 1908, he arrived in Gongju and began a clinic at the so-called dispensary. By the time he arrived, the clinic in Gongju had been temporarily closed. During his time in Gongju, he built strong relationships with the Korean people and served as the director of the clinic, treating patients and engaging in missionary work until he left in 1913.

On September 9, 1910, at the age of 29, he married Miss Evans in Seoul. The wedding ceremony was officiated by Reverend E.M. Cable and took place at the residence of D.A. Bunker. Mrs. Van Buskirk also devoted herself to church and social service activities. She taught classes at the Sunday school and visited women in their homes to provide support. During his time in Gongju, he gave 16,553 dispensary treatments, made about 140 house calls, and converted over 100 people to Christianity.³

At the meeting of the Korea Medical Missionary Association (KMMA) in 1909, he was appointed as a member of a commit-

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tee formed to consider the possibility of establishing a central Medical Missionary College in Seoul.⁴ At the meeting in 1910, it was decided to operate Severance Medical College as the Union Medical College of the Christian Churches of Korea. Accordingly, three members of the education committee were appointed to act with the officers of Severance Medical College in overseeing academic affairs, such as admissions, examinations, and graduation. It was also decided that the diplomas would be jointly signed by the president of the KMMA and the chairman of the education committee. Although the plans were not realized as originally intended, the official establishment of SUMC as a united medical institution of the denominations in 1913 was affected by the incorporation of the opinions of medical missionaries via the KMMA.

In September 1912, at the Annual Meeting of the KMMA held in Seoul, he was elected as the president of the KMMA.⁵ In this role, he promoted various cooperative projects among medical missionaries.

EDUCATIONAL AND MEDICAL WORKS AT SUMC

After spending 5 years in Gongju studying the Korean language, providing medical care, and engaging in missionary work, Dr. Van Buskirk left Gongju on September 10, 1913, and moved to Seoul, where he was appointed as a professor of physiology at SUMC (Fig. 1).³ During the fall and winter semesters of that year, he officially began his medical education by teaching physiology, physiological chemistry, therapeutics, and general medicine. His lectures were highly popular, primarily because he was the only missionary doctor at SUMC who could fluently lecture in Korean on the latest medical theories. In addition to medical education, he also took on clinical duties, working at the clinic from 11:00 AM to 1:00 PM. For several months, he treated approximately 20 patients per day.⁶

Dr. Van Buskirk provided Myung Sun Kim, who was in the graduating class of SUMC in 1924, with the opportunity to teach

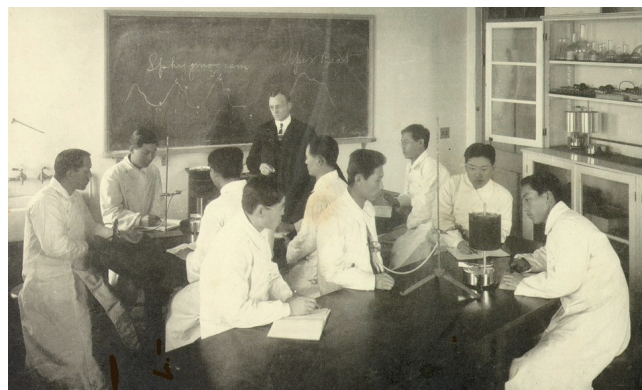


Fig. 1. Physiology lecture by Dr. Van Buskirk. He is giving a lecture of physiology at SUMC. Provided by the Dong-Eun Medical Museum.

physiology and biochemistry as an assistant and then encouraged Kim to remain at the school after graduation to continue working. Accordingly, after graduating from SUMC in 1925, Kim taught physiology and biochemistry as an assistant. In 1929, Kim went to the United States to study at Northwestern University, where he earned his doctoral degree in 1932. Throughout this process, Dr. Van Buskirk provided him with substantial support. Later on, Kim succeeded Dr. Van Buskirk and took charge of the Department of Physiology at SUMC.

ADMINISTRATIVE SERVICES

After being appointed to SUMC, Dr. Van Buskirk also took on administrative duties. Shortly after his appointment, he served as the secretary of SUMC, and from 1917 to 1922, he held the position of dean at SUMC. The dean had charge of the teaching schedule, kept the records, and looked after the welfare and discipline of the students. In the absence of president O.R. Avison, he served as the acting-president (Fig. 2).

On April 25, 1916, SUMC held the first meeting of the board of managers to reorganize into a special school. During this



Fig. 2. Yi Chai Young's diploma in 1915. Dr. Van Buskirk awarded the diploma as the acting-president during Avison's absence. Provided by the Dong-Eun Medical Museum.

meeting, he was elected as the vice-president of the board of managers. In March 1917, the foundation incorporation of SUMC was officially established, and on May 14, 1917, SUMC was raised to the status of an authorized medical college, during which he played a crucial role in the structural reorganization (Fig. 3).

From 1923 to 1932, he served as the vice-president of SUMC, making significant contributions to its development. At times, by resolution of the board of managers, he took full charge of the school's administrative affairs, overseeing education, hospital management, and nursing operations.

MISSIONARY AND SOCIAL ACTIVITIES DURING SERVICES AT SUMC

Meanwhile, Dr. Van Buskirk remained dedicated to missionary work, assisting in pastoral duties at various churches and actively participating in the YMCA for many years. On November 25, 1917, under his leadership and sponsorship, Indong Church (now Daejeon First Methodist Church) was built near the railway in Indong, Daejeon. This church became the first Western-style steeple chapel in Daejeon.

He also played an important role in the independence movement of Korea. During the March 1st Independence Movement in 1919, Japanese oppression was severe, leading to searches of hospitals, schools, and private homes. In response, on April 21, 1919, he strongly opposed these searches conducted by the Japanese authorities. He also urged that Japan's atrocities be exposed to the United States and condemned internationally. On June 29, 1919, he argued that just as a baby must be born after spending ten months in the mother's womb, Korea, hav-

ing reached the 10th year of Japanese annexation, was capable of achieving independence through the principle of national self-determination.⁷

He often carried out public health and hygiene awareness campaigns for Koreans. Deeply interested in the popularization of medical knowledge, he actively engaged in various initiatives. Being fluent in Korean, he delivered public lectures on health topics at churches and other venues. Additionally, he contributed to the dissemination of medical knowledge by publishing a series of articles on hygiene in media outlets such as the *Dong-A Ilbo*.

DEDICATION TO MEDICAL RESEARCH

While working at SUMC, Dr. Van Buskirk was actively involved not only in student education and administration but also in research activities. Notably, on November 4, 1914, he co-founded the Research Department of SUMC with R.G. Mills and A.I. Ludlow.⁸ The Research Department was established with the belief that better outcomes could be achieved if each department collaborated in research rather than conducting studies independently.

He conducted various studies and published numerous books and papers on nutrition and health of Korean people, public health and hygiene, Korean dietary habits, the climate of Korea, and religion. To better understand his research contributions, his major works can be examined in books (Fig. 4).

Before joining SUMC, in 1912, he published "The Care of Infants" (Fig. 4A). This book was the first (No. 1) in a medical series published by the Korean Christian Literature Society. It was the first publication planned to disseminate medical knowledge to the general public. The book provided guidance on raising healthy children, covering topics such as what to do during childbirth, hygiene in infant care, dietary practices, and how to handle illnesses. Thirteen years later, in 1925, an expanded edition was published.

"Three Things Injurious to the Body" was published in 1913 through The Woman's Christian Temperance Union, a key organization in the temperance movement. The book identifies three major harms to the body: alcohol, tobacco, and sexual immorality. It was written to educate and guide the public on the dangers of drinking, smoking, and sexual indulgence. A revised edition was published in 1921.

In 1926, he published "Science and Religion" (Fig. 4B) co-authored with Myung Sun Kim. Rather than adhering to a conservative theological perspective, he actively incorporated knowledge from various natural and social sciences to distinguish the roles of religion and science and explain their relationship. He argued that scientific exploration can reinforce religious truth, while religion can guide the ethical practice of science. Instead of viewing science and religion as conflicting forces, he emphasized harmony and cooperation. He demon-



Fig. 3. Faculty members at the time of SUMC's elevation to an authorized medical special college. The third from the left in the front row is Dr. Van Buskirk. Provided by the Dong-Eun Medical Museum.

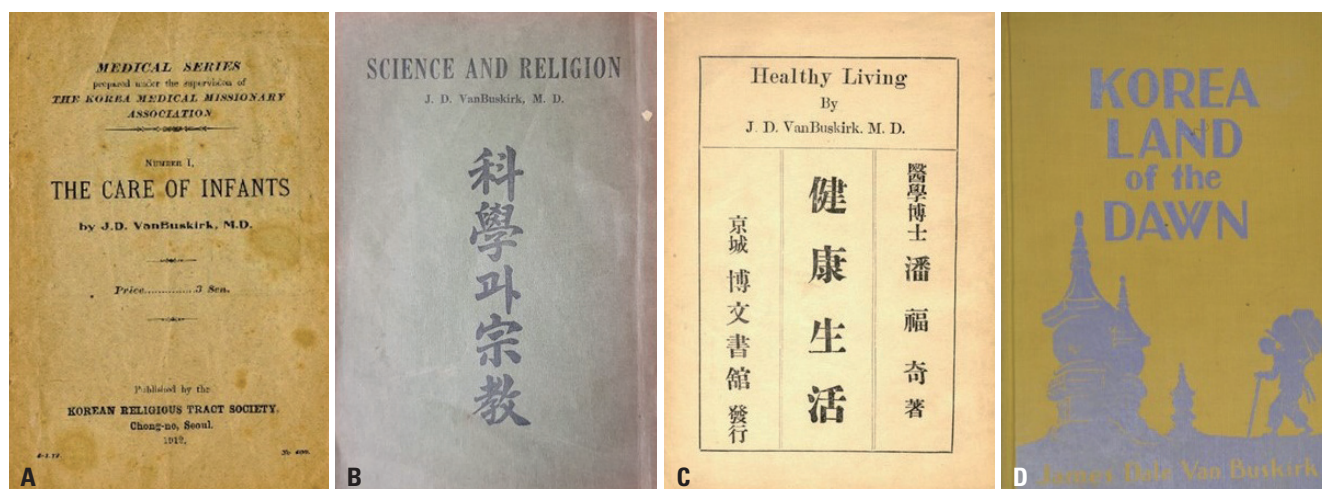


Fig. 4. Books published by Dr. Van Buskirk. (A) *The Care of Infants* (1912). (B) *Science and Religion* (1926). (C) *Healthy Living* (1929). (D) *Korea: Land of the Dawn* (1931). Provided by the Dong-Eun Medical Museum.

strated that religion is not unscientific, nor does it contradict science, asserting that scientific knowledge and Christian doctrine are fundamentally aligned.

In 1929, he published “Healthy Living” (Fig. 4C) which comprehensively covered medical knowledge essential throughout life, from birth to death. The book systematically organized information on childbirth, childcare, nutrition, sexuality, diseases, hygiene, mental health, and other aspects necessary for maintaining a healthy life. A revised and expanded edition was later published in 1938, co-authored with Dr. Van Buskirk and Myung Sun Kim.

“Korea: Land of the Dawn” (Fig. 4D) published in 1931 provides an overview of Korea’s long history, customs, and social environment, while also covering aspects related to medical missions. The book was written with the aim of introducing Korea to Western readers, offering them insights into the country’s culture and traditions. It reflects his genuine love and deep affection for Korea.

In the Research Department, Dr. Van Buskirk conducted extensive studies on Korean food and dietary habits, publishing numerous research papers. His works involved studies on what kinds of ingredients Koreans used, how they prepared their meals, and what kinds of foods they consumed. He also evaluated the physiological and psychological effects of Korean foods on individuals. Additionally, his research identified nutritional deficiencies in the Korean diet and explored practical solutions to improve dietary habits. Beyond these studies, he published lots of research articles on health, methods for measuring fatigue, the effects of climate on human efficiency, and so on.

LATE LIFE IN AMERICA

In the spring of 1930, Dr. Van Buskirk’s health began to decline,

and despite efforts, he did not fully recover. On January 18, 1931, he departed for the United States to seek medical treatment and to be with his father. He left Yokohama, Japan, on January 20, arriving at the port of Los Angeles on February 8, 1931. However, he was unable to return to Korea. Accordingly, in March 1932, he officially resigned from his position as the vice-president of SUMC and continued his medical treatment.

In 1937, he transferred to the South California Conference of the Methodist Church, where he served as a pastor for ten years. After reobtaining his medical license, he worked as a physician at a clinic called “The All Nations,” a community welfare medical institution in Los Angeles.¹ During this period, in 1952, he published “Religion, Healing, and Health.” In this book, he emphasized the value of religion in maintaining both physical and mental well-being, arguing that religion plays a significant role in healing and preventing many illnesses. He supported his beliefs with scientific evidence, demonstrating the interconnection between faith and health.

As a physician in the Los Angeles area, he retired at the age of 80 years. On December 27, 1969, he passed away at the age of 88 years.¹ After his passing, in August 1970, his wife donated \$2,100 as a student scholarship in honor of her late husband, who had dedicated a long time of service as a professor of physiology and biochemistry at SUMC.

CONCLUSIONS

As examined above, from the moment he set foot in Korea for medical missions, Dr. Van Buskirk dedicated his entire life to medical education, research, and missionary work in Korea. Although his relentless dedication ultimately took a toll on his health, forcing him to return to his homeland, the legacy he left behind in Korea remains profound and will continue to flourish. While his contributions have not yet been fully recognized,

they deserve to be re-evaluated and highlighted.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Conceptualization: Bae Hwan Lee and Baek Lan Moon. **Data curation:** all authors. **Formal analysis:** all authors. **Investigation:** all authors. **Methodology:** all authors. **Project administration:** Bae Hwan Lee and Do Hyung Kim. **Resources:** Bae Hwan Lee and Baek Lan Moon. **Supervision:** Do Hyung Kim. **Validation:** all authors. **Visualization:** Bae Hwan Lee and Baek Lan Moon. **Writing—original draft:** all authors. **Writing—review & editing:** all authors. **Approval of final manuscript:** all authors.

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