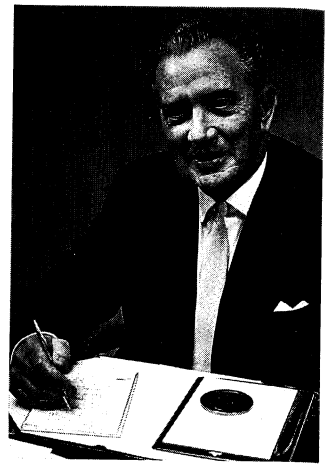
College Affairs

Obituary

ROBERT McWHIRTER



Robert McWhirter who died in Edinburgh on 24th October 1994 was an international figure of distinction in the field of radiotherapy and oncology. He is especially remembered for his original contributions in promoting the more conservative management of breast cancer, against formidable opposition from his surgical colleagues.

The son of the schoolmaster in the village of Ballantrae, Ayrshire, he was born in 1904. He respected the excellent teaching of his father with his ability to create a sense of wonder and enquiry in his young mind; this his father considered to be one of the best incentives to searching for further information. His secondary education was at Girvan Academy from where he qualified for entrance to Glasgow University. He graduated in medicine with high commendation in 1927.

After graduation he first spent four years in general practice in Prestwick. It was valuable experience for him and he always maintained that young doctors should spend some time in general practice before entering specialist training in hospital. His senior colleague ran a small nursing home and Robert McWhirter persuaded him to install an X-ray machine to help improve the quality of patient care. He soon became convinced of the importance of radiology in making an accurate clinical diagnosis.

His training in radiology began in Cambridge where he joined the DMRE course in 1932, after obtaining the Fellowship of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh. There he met Dr A. E. Barclay, one of his tutors, who would greatly influence his career. He enjoyed the stimulating atmosphere at Cambridge at a time when Lord Rutherford led a team of eminent scientists who were investigating the nature of radioactivity and the structure of the atom and when John Chadwick reported the discovery of the neutron. The Diploma course was completed in London at St Bartholomew's Hospital with Dr Neville Finzi and Dr Walter Levitt. Then he took the opportunity to spend some time in the department of radiology at the Mayo Clinic. There he was impressed with the clinical and laboratory facilities and also with the excellent library and the freedom of communication that existed there. He gained much from his time there while he impressed the clinic staff with his abilities. Shortly before he was due to leave, he was invited to accept a staff appointment by Dr Charlie Mayo.

However Robert had decided to accept a CRC research fellowship in Manchester so that he could benefit from studying with Dr Ralston Paterson who had, in November 1932, opened the Christie Hospital and Holt Radium Institute. This was recognised to be one of the best centres of radiotherapy in the world. At that time Paterson was developing, with H. M. Parker, a new system of gamma-ray dosimetry. Robert McWhirter realised the practical importance of

their work and was pleased to have the opportunity to gain first-hand experience of the application of the Paterson–Parker 'rules' for radium treatments.

In Manchester he undertook research on the influence of dose-rate of radium applications on clinical results, and participated as much as he could in the general clinical work of the Institute. After completing his research project he was invited by the governors of St Bartholomew's Hospital, London to become first assistant to Dr Finzi. The honorarium was £15 a year! He accepted the appointment which allowed him to get to know Sir Geoffrey Keynes, the distinguished surgeon. At that time Keynes was beginning to question the need to perform radical amputation of the breast to cure breast cancer. He was exploring the use of radium needles implanted in the breast. Robert McWhirter felt that X-ray beam therapy would be a more effective technique for breast irradiation. In these thoughts lay the foundation of his future clinical research in Edinburgh.

In 1935 Dr Alfred Barclay was appointed head of the X-ray department at the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh. One of his first decisions was to invite Robert McWhirter to join him as first assistant. Dr Barclay soon became frustrated with his administrative responsibilities and within one year decided to return to Cambridge so that he could pursue his research interests. The Board of the Royal Infirmary, with the support of the surgical staff, decided to offer charge of the radiological department to Robert McWhirter. He was 31 years old and responsible for what would become one of the most prestigious departments in the UK.

Robert McWhirter found the X-ray diagnostic equipment to be more suitable for a museum than for a teaching hospital. Clearly there were serious problems of both radiation and electrical hazards. He admitted that the films were of poor quality and that the reports were of even less value. Problems in the radiotherapy rooms were even more serious. In addition to the radiation hazards and dangers of electrocution, no instrument was available to measure the radiation dose to the cancer. He quickly set to modernising the department. At the same time he helped to design with colleagues in Manchester and Sheffield and engineers at Metropolitan Vickers, a safe and reliable machine for routine X-ray therapy.

Robert McWhirter quickly was recognised by his colleagues in Edinburgh to be an outstanding clinician. His knowledge of cancer was enormous, and his remarkable diagnostic abilities were frequently sought. In 1941 he was awarded jointly with Sir James Learmonth the Liston Victoria Jubilee prize by the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 1944.

He was invited to serve on the Radium Commission under the chairmanship of Sir Ernest Rock Carling from 1940 to 1944. The Commission had been established by the UK Government to supervise the loan of radium to selected hospitals. An important condition was that an audit be made of the outcome in every patient treated by the radioactive sources. Robert McWhirter was perplexed (as most Scots would have been) that the results were never published but he was asked not to press the issue. However he did feel that, had results been made available, the Paterson–Parker 'rules' would have received more immediate and proper attention.

It was in the 1940s that McWhirter began his studies of the treatment of breast cancer. He felt he should be able to demonstrate that the use of external

beam radiotherapy combined with less than radical surgery could produce as good survival as the traditional surgery alone, and with much less troublesome side-effects. At that time most surgeons disagreed with his opinions and the concerted opposition from the surgical fraternity was strong. In 1948 he was invited to give a presentation of his results to a meeting at the Royal Society of Medicine in London. Two distinguished surgeons, Sir Gordon Gordon-Taylor and Sir Stanford Cade, were to present their results of radical mastectomy. It was a packed lecture theatre and the atmosphere was highly charged. Sir Geoffrey Keynes who had come along from Barts to give his support to McWhirter was unable to get in! The meeting, Robert felt, had been designed to confirm the supremacy of radical mastectomy for early breast cancer and to condemn publicly the Edinburgh method. The outcome of the debate may not have been altogether clear on that occasion but the McWhirter approach became increasingly adopted around the world. Today the combination of limited surgery and radiotherapy may be regarded as the standard management of early breast cancer. In Edinburgh, as a result of Robert McWhirter's patient and quiet diplomacy, agreement was reached with Sir John Bruce, the Regius Professor of Surgery, to conduct a randomised trial to compare radical mastectomy with simple mastectomy and radiotherapy. The disease-free survival at 10 years, corrected for intercurrent deaths, was 52 per cent in both groups. Subsequently many other trials were conducted which confirmed the effectiveness of the McWhirter approach.

The results of Robert McWhirter's research would eventually transform world opinion about the management of breast cancer. His achievement was a mark not only of his scientific acuity but also of his tenacity and courage against the powerful opposition of surgical colleagues. He enjoyed the scientific debate which he had to conduct with physicians and surgeons around the world. In all the controversy, which was often heated, he was always held in great respect for everyone recognised his absolute integrity. The principles which he helped establish for the management of breast cancer now have a permanent place in the history of radiotherapeutics and cancer care.

In 1946 he was appointed to the newly endowed Forbes Chair of Medical Radiology in the University of Edinburgh, a post which he held until his retirement in September 1970. Soon after taking up the appointment, he decided that diagnostic radiology and radiotherapy should be separate departments in the Royal Infirmary and that he would thereafter concentrate his professional activities exclusively on radiotherapeutics. Among his many achievements was to plan a new Radiotherapy Institute, now the department of Clinical Oncology at the Western General Hospital which was opened in 1953 to serve the population of Edinburgh and south east Scotland.

Robert McWhirter also had a renowned reputation as an inspiring teacher. Many postgraduate medical students came to Edinburgh to train in radiotherapy. Several of his former students became heads of departments in radiotherapy centres in Scotland, England and around the world.

He became heavily involved in the activities of the Faculty of Radiologists in London and served on its committees and council for many years. He was elected a Warden of the Fellowship, an office he held from 1961 to 1966 and with it responsibility for supervising standards of training in radiology and radiotherapy. In 1966 he became President of the Faculty of Radiologists (later to become the

Royal College of Radiologists) and was a great ambassador on behalf of the Faculty and its Fellows at home and overseas.

He was soon recognised as an international authority in radiotherapy and oncology and frequently invited on lecture tours around the world. His advice was regularly sought abroad and he advised the governments of South Africa, Australia, Eire and Nigeria. He was elected to the Honorary Fellowship of the Royal Australasian College of Radiologists in 1954, of the American College of Radiology in 1965 and of the Faculty of Radiologists of the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland in 1967. He was also an honorary member of radiological societies in France, Italy and Japan. In Scotland he served with distinction as President of the Medical and Dental Defence Union throughout a long period of office from 1959 to 1970. He also served the National Society for Cancer Relief for many years and was awarded their Gold Medal in 1985. In 1963 he was made a CBE.

Robert was a quiet, reserved and private man. He enjoyed his membership of Bruntsfield Links Golfing Society where he had many good and close friends. He was a keen and knowledgeable ornithologist with an original approach of recording his observations of bird life on cine-film. He took pleasure in sharing his love of bird watching with visiting professional colleagues when he would take them to his favourite sites of protected colonies of sea birds near Edinburgh.

In his full and busy life Robert was lovingly supported by his wife and constant companion Dr Susan Muir MacMurray whom he married in 1937, and who survives him. Their only son, Bill, is a paediatric oncologist and head of the department of Child Health in the University of Queensland at the Royal Children's Hospital, Brisbane.

W. DUNCAN

Deaths of Fellows

MICHAEL JOHN BAILEY

Dr M. J. Bailey died on 24th December 1994. He was born on 5th January 1920 and graduated MB ChB at the University of Cape Town in 1941. From 1952 until his retirement in 1986 he was a physician at Groote Schuur Hospital and Victoria Hospital in Cape Town. He gained the Membership of this College in 1952 and was elected a Fellow in 1994.

AGNES ARCHIBALD BRASH

Dr A. A. Brash died on 30th January 1995 at home in Iona. She was born on 15th January 1918 and qualified at Edinburgh University in 1942 becoming MD(Edin) in 1948. In 1950 she was appointed a lecturer in medicine at the Christian Medical College in Ludhiana, Punjab, where she helped to raise the standard of medical teaching to degree level. She was elected a Fellow in 1964.

HENRY HUNTER CORRIGALL

Dr H. H. Corrigall died on 8th December 1994 aged 86. He qualified in 1932 at Edinburgh where he held house posts and became a Member of this College in 1936. He joined the RAMC at the outbreak of World War II and served in India. Settling in the Isle of Man, he became physician at Noble's Hospital and consultant to the Isle of Man Health Services Board. He was elected to the Fellowship in 1943.

LESLIE HUME

Dr L. Hume died on 2nd December 1994. Born on 22nd August 1947 he attended Edinburgh University and graduated MB ChB in 1971. He took the Membership of this College in 1974 and gained the MD(Edin) in 1977. He moved to Sheffield in 1979 as a senior registrar and in 1986 was appointed physician in geriatric and general medicine in Dudley, West Midlands. He was elected a Fellow in 1991.

JOHN PAUL

Dr J. Paul died on 27th June 1994 aged 72. He was born in Wishaw, Lanarkshire and graduated MB ChB in 1945 and PhD in 1951 from the University of Glasgow. In 1953 he was director of the tissue culture laboratory in the department of biochemistry in Glasgow University and in 1966 became director of the cancer research laboratory at the Royal Beatson Memorial Hospital in Glasgow. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 1962 and of this College in 1971.

THOMAS PHILP

Dr T. Philp died on 18th December 1994. He was born in Kirkcaldy on 19th April 1923 and qualified in medicine at Edinburgh University in 1945. After serving in West Africa and India in the RAMC he returned to Edinburgh in 1948 and worked in the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh as a radiologist becoming consultant in administrative charge of radiological services. He was elected a Fellow of the Faculty of Radiologists in 1956 and of this College in 1990.

JOHN MACKAY SUTHERLAND

Dr J. M. Sutherland died on 8th February 1995. Born on 20th August 1919, he graduated MB ChB from the University of Glasgow in 1943. He served with the RNVR and with the Fleet Air Arm until 1946. On return to Glasgow he specialised in neurology at the Western Infirmary and took the Membership of this College. In 1956 he emigrated to Australia where he became neurologist at the Royal Brisbane Hospital and the Royal Children's Hospital in 1958. He was elected a Fellow of this College in 1961.

College Notices

The Library

SOME RECENT ADDITIONS

AMERICAN PSYCHIATRIC ASSOCIATION: Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders. Washington, USA, American Psychiatric Association, 1994.

BUCHAN, D: Folk traditions and folk medicine. Edinburgh, Canongate Academic, 1994.

BYNAM, W: Science and the practice of medicine in the 19th century. Cambridge University Press, 1994.

CLOKE, G: This female man of God. Routledge, 1995 (*Presented by the author*).

COLE TR, WINKLER MG: Oxford book of ageing. Oxford University Press, 1994.

COX RAF, EDWARDS FC, MCCALLUM RI *eds*: Fitness for work: the medical aspects. 2nd ed. Oxford University Press, 1995 (*Presented by Dr McCallum*).

DIGBY A: Making a medical living. Cambridge University Press, 1994.

ELLIS RH: The case books of Dr John Snow. (Medical History, suppl no 14) Wellcome Institute, 1994.

EMERY AEH, EMERY MLH: The history of a genetic disease. Royal Society of Medicine, 1995 (*Presented by the authors*).

FABRICUS J: Syphilis in Shakespeare's England. Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1994.

FIRKIN BG, WHITWORTH, JA: Dictionary of medical eponyms. Carnforth, Lancashire, Parthenon Publ Group, 1990.

HAHNEMANN S: The homoeopathic medical doctrine. 1833. (Classics of medicine library, 1995) (*Presented by Dr Myre Sim*).

HEBERDEN W: An introduction to the study of physics. 1929. (Classics of medicine library, 1994) (*Presented by Dr Myre Sim*).

HUNTER JAA *et al*: Clinical dermatology. 2nd ed. Blackwell Scientific, 1994 (*Presented by Dr Hunter*).

JAMES RR: Henry Wellcome. Hodder & Stoughton, 1994.

KWAAN HC, SAMAMA MM: Clinical thrombosis. Florida, CRC Press, 1990 (*Presented by Dr HC Kwaan*).

MCVAUGH MR: Medicine before the plague. Cambridge University Press, 1994.

MILLS R: Cetacian strandings and paralytic shellfish poisoning on the north east coast of Britain. 1994 (*Presented by the author*).

PROUST AJ: History of medicine in Canberra ... Australia, Brolga Press, 1994 (*Presented by the author*).

ROBERTSON JIS, BALL SG: Hypertension for the clinician. Saunders, 1994.

TEFF H: Reasonable care. Oxford University Press, 1994.

WILLERSON JT, COHN JN: Cardiovascular medicine. Churchill Livingstone, 1994.

Symposia

IMAGING IN CONTEMPORARY MEDICINE

A symposium was held on 15th March 1995 in the Postgraduate Medical Centre, Aberdeen.

The speakers were:

Dr G. Bydder	Current advances in MRI of the brain.
Dr A. R. Moody	Magnetic resonance angiography.
Dr D. Brookes	Positron emission tomography in amyotrophic lateral sclerosis.
Dr D. M. Hansell	Imaging of the airways.
Dr F. Gleeson	Imaging in alveolar and interstitial lung disease.
Dr A. G. Wilson	The modern imaging approach to eosinophilic lung disease.
Dr S. Walton	Radio-nuclide imaging of viable myocardium.
Dr S. R. Underwood	Magnetic resonance of the cardiovascular system.
Dr M. Monaghan	Recent advances in echocardiography.
Dr D. C. Cumberland	Imaging of coronary arteries: angiography, angioscopy and ultrasound.

PSYCHOSOMATIC SYNDROMES

A symposium was held on 5th April 1995 in the Queen Mother Conference Centre, Edinburgh

The speakers were:

Dr T. M. Brown	Somatization: the clinical burden.
Dr S. G. Potts and Dr R. C. Heading	Non-cardiac chest pain.
Miss J. A. Wilson	Globus sensation and functional dysphonia.
Dr A. J. Pelosi	Syndromes of chronic fatigue.
Dr M. J. G. Farthing	Psychological factors and abdominal symptoms.
Dr I. J. Deary	Psychological constructs in psychosomatic illness.
Dr C. Feinmann	Atypical facial pain and headache.
Dr D. Wray	The clinical presentation of functional facial pain syndromes.
Dr P. Croft	Fibromyalgia and soft tissue pain.
Dr F. H. Creed	Conceptual issues in psychosomatics.

HOW SAFE IS BLOOD TRANSFUSION?

A joint meeting with the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh was held on 21st April 1995 in Edinburgh.

The speakers were:

Dr T. F. Zuck	Overview: Products, long and short-term risks.
Prof R. S. Tedder	Virus transmission and its prevention.
Prof O. Eremin	Immuno-modulation
Dr S. J. Urbaniak	Long-term risks of transfusion.
Dr M. Contreras	Wrong blood.

Prof C. McCollum	Why transfuse?
Dr N. Soni	Why use albumin?
Dr W. G. Murphy	The patient's view.
Dr D. B. L. McClelland	The future.

MANAGEMENT OF FALLS IN ELDERLY PEOPLE

A symposium was held on 3rd May 1995 in the Queen Mother Conference Centre, Edinburgh.

The speakers were:

Dr P. W. Overstall	Falls in elderly people: causes and consequences.
Dr N. R. Colledge	Balance and falls.
Dr R. A. Kenny	Cardiovascular causes and falls.
Dr J. M. Simpson	Physiotherapy intervention.
Dr G. P. Mulley	Rehabilitation of the patient with recurrent falls.
Dr M. E. T. McMurdo	The role of exercise.
Dr J. H. Downton	The prevention of falls.
Dr E. Dickinson	Guidelines for the management of falls.