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Professor Stewart Cameron (1934–2023) — The Legend. In Memoriam

Abstract

It was in the second half of the 20th century when the first clinics and societies of nephrology started to spring across Europe, triggering the intensive development of the new medical specialty which had just emerged from internal medicine. The process had its outstanding leaders, among whom was Professor Stewart Cameron, who died in July 2023. This paper is a short attempt to summarise S. Cameron's achievements.

Key words: history of nephrology, giants in nephrology, Stewart Cameron

INTRODUCTION

After World War II, a new field of medicine, known as nephrology, started to emerge from the more general internal medicine. At the forefront of the process were many outstanding figures, among whom was the world-famous British professor — Stewart Cameron.

Stewart Cameron established modern nephrology at Guy's Hospital. London following in the footsteps of one of his heroes, Richard Bright, the 19th century Guy's physician who was one of the first influential figures in the study of kidney disease. Cameron's impact on Guy's was formidable, but so much more was his influence on nephrology throughout the UK and across the world. He was one of the world's leading nephrologists in the second half of the 20th century. His supreme gifts of intelligence, articulacy and leadership were matched by his innate modesty and his unending concern for the careers of others.

John Stewart Cameron (but always known as Stewart) was born on 5th July 1934 in Aberdeen, Great Britain, where his father was in the merchant navy, but the family moved to London in 1946 where his father worked in film production at Ealing Studios. Stewart was a gifted draughtsman (as had been his father) and for a time considered going to art school but instead decided to pursue a career in medicine. At first he planned to return to Aberdeen University to study, however differences in school qualifications between England and Scotland meant this was not straightforward, so instead he entered Guy's in 1953 (Fig. 1).

He got 1st Class Honours in an intercalated BSc in physiology, and from then on was determined to be a clinician scientist. He graduated MB BS with Distinction in 1959. Unsure at first the branch of medicine he would pursue, Professor John Butterfield at Guy's became his mentor, and he began to study diabetes. But nephrology had grabbed his interest, not least when he read The Kidney: Structure and Function in Health and Disease (1951) by Homer Smith which was the brilliant definitive book on renal physiology at the time. Butterfield arranged for him to go to Cornell University, New York supported by a Fulbright Scholarship to work in nephrology with E Lovell 'Stretch' Becker and Robert F Pitts. Before he went, he and John Trounce, a clinical pharmacologist, had already established at Guy's the beginnings of a renal unit, including dialysis for acute renal failure [1].

After his time in New York he was determined to make nephrology his career. He returned in 1963 as Lecturer in the Department

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Figure 1. John Stewart Cameron (photo Janusz Ostrowski)

of Medicine at Guy's, and wrote his MD thesis on glomerular permeability to proteins in the nephrotic syndrome, based on his work at Cornell. From 1967 he was Senior Lecturer in Medicine at Guy's, then Professor of Renal Medicine in 1974, and from 1975 Director of the Clinical Sciences Laboratories at Guy's. He held both these positions until his retirement.

This was an exciting time to be a nephrologist. People with irreversible kidney failure (a uniformly fatal condition until then) were becoming treatable; the possibility loomed of giving them even years of extra life through dialysis treatment or a kidney transplant. While in New York Cameron had seen something of these emerging techniques, but they were only just beginning in the UK, and it was clear that they were complex and demanding — both for patients and doctors. The work required practicality and passion, and could only be delivered successfully by those willing to commit their emotional and intellectual energy unstintingly. Cameron had found his metier, and from the mid-1960s he set off to establish a renal unit at Guy's, which had been selected by the Department of Health as one of several pilot dialysis units being trialled in the UK. Recognising from the beginning that a chronic dialysis programme on its own carried the risk of unsustainable growth as more and more patients began treatment, he realised that the ideal strategy was to develop in parallel a kidney transplantation programme.

He was joined by Chisholm Ogg, at first his registrar, and soon his consultant colleague. Together they built a unit which set the standards, and became well known far and wide. Collaborative teamwork was the watchword. All were partners in the kidney family — patients and staff alike. Nurses, technicians, dietitians and many others knew they were respected members of the team and responded to the responsibility and autonomy they were being given. First names were the norm, far from the tradition of the time. Such team working was innovative and unique to nephrology at the time, now it is everywhere in medicine.

The work was all-consuming - their success meant patients requiring treatment for kidney failure came flooding in. They were even treating children as well as adults until Cyril Chantler joined them as a paediatric nephrologist in the early 1970s. Cameron described just how exciting it was in those early days, every day bringing a new challenge, a new opportunity - so much to learn, so much to do. They were giving it everything but there was a price. A hepatitis epidemic swept through the Guy's renal unit in 1969, and Cameron himself was for a time severely ill with hepatitis B.

Figure 2. John Stewart Cameron receiving an award for scientific achievements from the President of ERA-EDTA Prof. Raymond Vanholder during the ERA-EDTA Congress in Paris, France in 2012 (Photo Janusz Ostrowski)

But the Guy's unit flourished and grew, many more joined the staff, and soon the unit had an international reputation, receiving visitors from all over the world.

Developing the Guy's unit would be a career high for many, but Cameron was just beginning.

He was always determined that Guy's would be a place where research flourished alongside clinical work. He had an encyclopaedic knowledge of the whole of kidney disease, but it was in the study of glomerulonephritis, immune-mediated kidney disease, he especially made his mark. Following in the tradition of Richard Bright, Cameron recognised the importance of longitudinal study of personally observed cases as the means to understand how disease progresses. Alongside clinical observation Bright had used the best available material for laboratory study — in his case only autopsy kidneys (some of Bright's which studied are still in the Guy's Museum). Alongside clinical observation Cameron could use the insights now being provided by the study of kidney biopsies, as well as new serological tests, for example tests of lupus and for complement activation.

He became a world leader in the study of the natural history of glomerular disease. He made outstanding contributions in glomerulonephritis, nephrotic syndrome, and lupus nephritis, as well as renal transplantation in adults and children. He was also an authority on altered urate and purine metabolism and their impact on the kidney, working with Anne Simmonds. He wrote fluently, and in the end his published output was formidable: more than 450 research papers, over a hundred book chapters, and a dozen books large and small. He was a founding editor of the Oxford Textbook of Clinical Nephrology now in its 4th Edition [2].

And he lectured brilliantly. When Cameron went to the rostrum, he commanded your attention. He became a ubiquitous presence at national and international meetings on glomerulonephritis. If you saw his name was not on the programme, your heart sank a little because you knew that without him the meeting would generate less energy, less intellectual force, less joie de vivre.

Clinician and researcher, that would be a career high for most, but Cameron still had so much more to give. Ideally suited he was soon drawn into leadership in the kidney world beyond Guy's — becoming President not only of the Renal Association in the UK, but also of EDTA-ERA and the International Society of Nephrology. In the early 1990s he even allowed himself to be president of both the Renal Association and the ISN at the same time — an impossible workload for anyone less gi-

Figure 3. Stewart Cameron with his wife, Alison, during the IAHN Congress in Wieniec-Zdroj, Poland in 2017 (Photo Grzegorz Główczyński)

fted or committed [3]. Back in 2012, during the ERA-EDTA Congress in Paris, France, he received an award for outstanding achievements in the field of science (Fig. 2). S. Cameron also played a very active part in the International Association for the History of Nephrology (IAHN), whose honorary member he became in 2013 during the congress in Patras-Olympia, Greece.

His international leadership was not just titular, he did not sit at home directing traffic, he travelled the world teaching in many different settings, and especially encouraging the emergence of nephrology in low resource countries. With his gift for friendship and his unrelenting energy, he was a much-loved mentor to hundreds of nephrologists, many of whom came from abroad to Guy's and then returned to their own countries.

But it is more than the sum of all this work for which he should be remembered. Rather It is for the way he bore all his gifts. His complete lack of self-importance, despite his remarkable talents, his enthusiasm for the work of others, his encouragement of those many he mentored whose names and personal circumstance he never forgot – it is these for which he is most loved.

Cyril Chantler described him best: 'Stewart was the most curiously intelligent doctor I have ever known. We used to say at Guy's if you wanted to know something about anything you had to go the library……. or better still….. ask Stewart.' Any conversation with him was a delight, a chance to learn. He was an extraordinary multilingual polymath, he read widely and voraciously. It seemed he knew more than anyone about everything - especially nephrology, and the history of nephrology. But equally about the poet John Keats (who had been a Guy's medical student), and rock climbing, and Gaelic poetry, and history, and wildlife, and so much more. Yet he was never grand about it, he simply loved knowledge, and loved sharing it.

Unusually for those days he had married and had two children while still a medical student, a choice somewhat frowned upon at the time by the Guy's establishment, some of whom wrongly suggested to him it might hamper his career development. Margot was a perfect foil and partner for him, and she joined him regularly on his nephrology travels.

When still at the height of his powers, he was forced to retire early from clinical and academic work following complications after urgent cardiac surgery. He retired to the beautiful hill country of Cumbria in north west England, and though dogged subsequently by ill health he continued to write energetically across the range of his interests (including for example an extensive history of the Ross of Mull) and

immersing himself in village life. When Margot developed dementia, he cared for her devotedly at home until her death. Emerging from his bereavement, he in due course found great happiness with Alison (née Russell) whom he met again forty three years after she had been a ward sister at Guy's. Together they had written in 1971 the first book on nursing aspects of renal disease, dialysis and transplantation; they married in 2018 (Fig. 3) [4].

CONCLUSION

John Stewart Cameron passed away on 30th July 2023 at the age of 89. He had bestridden the world of nephrology. Once in a generation comes such a doctor whose natural gifts, intellect, energy, and modesty put them head and shoulders above us all. Greatness borne so lightly is a wonderful thing.

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