

EDITORIAL

Professor W Bryan Jennett CBE MD FRCS – An Appreciation

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Bryan Jennett, Dean of the Faculty of Medicine at Glasgow University from 1981 to 1986, was a surgical giant. The leading academic neurosurgeon of his era, he takes his place alongside such greats as Lister and Macewen, both Regius Professors of Surgery at the same university. Like them he changed the face of medicine worldwide and has left a legacy greater than the clinical practice of neurosurgery.

Bryan Jennett was born on 1st March 1926 in Twickenham to Scottish and Irish parents. After a time on the family farm in Lanarkshire during the war, he considered studying agriculture. But after a fortunate last minute change of heart he studied medicine in Liverpool.

He had a brilliantly logical and enquiring mind that led him to question all that he did, and to seek scientific answers to the many problems faced by neurosurgeons. He was not the first to introduce clinical science to neurosurgery, but he was the first to use the laboratory sciences as the basis for determining clinical practice.

His desire for a career combining clinical and laboratory research led to a post in Glasgow. Encouraged by Sir Charles Illingworth and supported by neurosurgical colleagues, he developed a thriving research programme and was appointed Professor of Neurosurgery in 1968.

His department became a magnet for neurosurgical trainees and researchers from all over the world. He inspired and supported his young surgeons enthusiastically and generously throughout their careers. He developed an enquiring department, and rather than sit on high and hand down research projects for others to do his work, he nurtured and supported people to develop their own ideas.

He was at his finest correcting early drafts of papers from his junior surgeons, when he could not resist improving them to the point of almost rewriting them.

At one time seven out of ten professors of neurosurgery were Glasgow trained. Others went to chairs in subjects ranging from psychology and psychological medicine to medical statistics, and to posts throughout the rest of the world.

He was interested in the less glamorous side of neurosurgery, those diseases that result in serious and longstanding disability. He had a talent for forging collaborations that stimulated scientists in other disciplines to bring their talents to bear on his major interests of head injury and the mechanisms of acute brain damage, hitherto of little interest to neurosurgeons.

The experimental and clinical work of a cerebral circulation group, co-directed with Murray Harper, advanced understanding of disorders of cerebral blood flow and intracranial pressure and set new standards in neuroanaesthesia and the care of head injuries.

Early work signalled his enduring interest in unravelling the uncertainties of the prognosis of head injury. This led to the description of the Persistent Vegetative State in 1972 with a leading American neurologist, Dr Fred Plum, the Glasgow Coma Scale in 1974 with Graham Teasdale, and the Glasgow Outcome Scale in 1975 with Michael Bond, subsequently Professor of Psychological Medicine in Glasgow. Two of these papers were selected as the most significant published by the Lancet in that year.

Bryan Jennett published and lectured extensively on many subjects but perhaps his greatest contribution was the Glasgow Coma Scale which he developed along with Graham Teasdale. It rationalised the description of coma and revolutionised the management of head injured patients worldwide.

Pioneering international collaborative studies of prognosis and treatment followed. Unique in their scale and continuity, they raised the profile of head injury care throughout the world. Close collaboration with the Department of Neuropathology and Professors Adams and Graham, highlighted avoidable causes of brain damage and in turn led to guidelines for organised clinical management that significantly reduced mortality and disability of head injured patients.

Another landmark was his contribution in establishing the criteria for brain death. This was not just an outstanding piece of clinical work but also an important piece of philosophy. When the inevitable opposition appeared Bryan remained resolute.

His understanding of the mechanisms of brain damage, his ability to rapidly accumulate and analyse clinical data and to communicate his findings and convictions with telling clarity were crucial in establishing professional and public confidence. He was being pressured from all sides to change his proposals but he remained firm. Without his courageous and committed stance, transplantation programmes could have been set back for years and many recipients denied their benefits.

It was a difficult fight and he upset many who had a desire to compromise, but he stood firm and his proposals were introduced unchanged. His determination in this and in other areas was almost certainly the reason he was never awarded the knighthood he so richly deserved.

Bryan Jennett's talents as a communicator were reflected in a wide and extensive programme of speaking engagements and written outputs. The latter included *Introduction to Neurosurgery* which ran to five editions between 1964 and 1995. These attributes continued after retirement in 1991 with the publication in 2002 of a monograph *The Vegetative State, Medical Facts, Ethical and Legal Dilemmas*.

He retained an active interest to the end. His final brief publication 'The early diagnosis of spinal tumours. A personal story spanning 50 years' appeared in the *Journal of Neurosurgery* in the month before his death.

Outside medicine, with his wife, whom he met while studying at Liverpool, and his family, he was a keen cruising sailor on the west coast of Scotland. Bryan went on to be a founder member and later Commodore of the Serpent Yacht Club.

He travelled widely throughout the world. He and his wife Sheila also entertained many hundreds at their home or on their boat. Sheila Jennett is a gifted and productive professor of respiratory physiology who was a collaborator for both him and his researchers.

Tone deaf himself, Bryan was a great sponsor of musical activities in the family and had the pleasure of enjoying the music created by all his children and grandchildren including his daughter who became a professional cellist.

He leaves his wife Sheila, three sons, a daughter, seven grandchildren and one great grandchild.

Bryan Jennett; born 1st March 1926, died 26th January 2008.