Obituary

David NS Kerr (27.12.1927–20.4.2014)

J Stewart Cameron

Recently we lost David Kerr, the last of the triumvirate who formed the EDTA half a century ago in 1963-64. Some time ago, in 1992, we also lost Wim Drukker, only last December Stanley Shaldon died, and now David Kerr has gone. The chains that bind us to the past are gently slipping away….

David Nichol Sharp Kerr was born in Hackney on the 27th of December 1927. Strangely, Stanley Shaldon was also born in the same borough of London four years later, although neither of their families had their origins in that area. David came from a family of Scottish origin—the Kerrs are a notable lowland clan from between Kelso and Jedburgh which border with England. Thus, he was sent up to be educated at the famous George Watson’s Boys School in Edinburgh, and then studied medicine at the University of Edinburgh, qualifying MBChB with Honours in 1951.

After initial junior doctor appointments in Edinburgh, he went to the University of Wisconsin in 1952 and studied for an MSc in anatomy. Then, from 1953-1955, he undertook national military service as a surgeon-lieutenant in the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve. He returned to the Department of Medicine in Edinburgh before being appointed as a registrar in medicine at Hammersmith Hospital. Whilst training in hepatology, he was encouraged by Sheila Sherlock to move to Newcastle where George Smart was establishing a dialysis unit. David was told that he would be in charge of the renal unit “in his spare time”. Thus, David’s career in nephrology started rather late, when he was already 31 years old.

He was initially appointed First Assistant in Medicine in the Medical School, King’s College, University of Durham in 1959 and became Lecturer in Medicine at Newcastle University in 1961. He was promoted to Senior Lecturer in 1963 and subsequently was appointed to a Personal Chair in Medicine in 1968. Appointed Professor of Medicine and Head of the Department of Medicine in 1971, he stayed in this post until his departure to become Dean of the Royal Postgraduate Medical School, London in 1983.

In the 24 years that he spent in Newcastle, he established an academic renal unit with an outstanding international reputation. The breadth of the research that he fostered in this time is evidenced by the range of publications that came out of the unit. Not surprisingly he was particularly interested in the technical aspects of dialysis and its complications. In Newcastle, dialysis for acute renal injury began in 1959 using a machine designed by Nils Alwall in Sweden, rather than rotating drum models or the coil designs of Kolff and Watschinger used elsewhere throughout the United Kingdom. Soon after, in 1964, his unit was amongst the first in the UK to undertake long-term haemodialysis for irreversible renal failure, using a Kii-type rebuildable flat-plate dialyser. This work led to the seminal observations in Newcastle on the role of aluminium derived from the water supply in the development of bone and brain disease in dialysis patients. David instilled the importance of clinical observation in research into all of those who trained in nephrology in Newcastle during this period. This led to a series of studies examining the natural history of conditions including renal bone disease, reflux nephropathy and hypertension as well as early observations in renal transplantation. Whilst he was primarily a clinical researcher, he recognised the importance of applied basic science and was an early champion for the use of molecular genetics in clinical research.

David established Newcastle as one of the best and happiest places in the UK to train in nephrology. This legacy is still to be seen in the consultant staff of renal units throughout the UK. In addition to this, he had a passion for training clinicians from overseas, particularly from developing countries. A steady stream of overseas fellows were to be found in that period in his clinics and laboratory. Not only interested in their academic and clinical training, David took great personal responsibility for their pastoral care. As a result, he is held in great personal affection by nephrologists spread across the globe.

He left Newcastle in 1983 to take up the post of Dean of the Royal Postgraduate Medical School, which he held until 1991. During this time, David steadfastly and calmly steered the school through a period of financial and administrative turbulence. Despite the huge administrative burden of the dean’s post, David still found time to remain true to his clinical and...
academic calling. He made a valuable contribution to the clinical service in nephrology, and always found time to provide wise advice to colleagues and trainees. He also established a course leading to a Diploma in Nephrology which was extremely popular with overseas trainees, many of whom went on to successful careers in their home countries. Not surprisingly, his portrait as dean (Figure 3) shows him surrounded by a group of international students, rather than in a formal solitary pose.

David’s esteem in the field of nephrology was marked by numerous prestigious invited lectures and awards too numerous to list here.

Central to this narrative, he was one of the three founding members of the European Dialysis and Transplantation Association in 1963. That year, the International Society of Nephrology held its second meeting in Prague, and as a consequence Europe was host to not only local nephrologists but also Americans and Antipodeans. Stanley Shaldon exploited this fortunate circumstance by organizing a meeting at his own hospital, the Royal Free in North London, where the topic of acute renal failure (today re-branded as “acute renal injury”) and its treatment by haemodialysis was explored. Wim Drukker and David attended the meeting, and both suggested independently to Stanley that a society be formed to arrange more similar meetings on topics related to dialysis for European nephrologists. This matter was explored in a discussion between the three pioneers and progressed further after the dinner, held in the magnificent hall of the Society of Apothecaries. At the end of the meeting, a decision to begin the creation of such a society was determined. David has left us his account of these events [1], as has Wim Drukker [2], and Stanley’s account is available on video.

The initial idea of the triumvirate was to have a small, selective society confined to Western Europe (the Western European Dialysis Association, WEDA) which would deal only with the application of dialysis to renal problems, and planning was begun for a meeting in 1964. This model was rapidly overturned, however, especially at a preliminary meeting where several others, in particular Gabriel Richet of Paris, argued for a grander model, incorporating participation from all over Europe, including the then-entrenched and politically hostile East European Bloc, thus involving a larger number of participants. Others suggested that transplantation should be included, even though its value and future remained in doubt in 1964 [3], so that the first meeting of the new association was under the name “European Dialysis and Transplant Association” (EDTA), even though at the first meeting in the Wilhelmina hospital in Amsterdam in 1964, no papers on transplantation were actually presented! Around 100 people from all over Europe participated, and a few Americans attended as well; a pattern which was repeated during the following decade. David played a major role in organizing the second meeting held in 1965 in Newcastle, but with characteristic modesty allowed his surgical colleague and transplant surgeon John Swinney to preside over the meeting. From 1964 to 1969 he became the first editor of the annual Proceedings of the meetings, and from 1976 to 1979 was an elected member of the council.

In 1983, when the meeting of the EDTA came to London, he was already President of the Renal Association of the United Kingdom, and who else could be President of the EDTA conference? In 1986, at the Budapest meeting of the EDTA, in recognition of his enormous contributions, he was acclaimed an honorary member. In his personal view of the history of the association [1], he dealt with the fact that none of the initial plans he and his colleagues had made in 1963 had become permanent, instead they had evolved and had been expanded and improved. These included finally the suggestion of Arthur Kennedy of Scotland, when President in 1971, and brought to fruition later by Vittorio Andreucci in 1985 [4], to introduce general nephrology into the repertoire and change the name of the association – initially a very controversial change and not to the taste of all members then or since. Shaldon remained a firm opponent of this move. In 1985, David had no role in burying the Proceedings he had begun, as it had become obvious that the reputation of the association could be better served by a journal, which became Nephrology Dialysis Transplantation. However, he wrote in 1989 [1], “Although I launched the Proceedings, I shed no tears for it …… in today’s competitive environment, the
only publications that matter are those in peer-review journals”. The decisions to start a journal, what its name would be and the abbreviation, were all made rapidly in the manner he used so successfully, at an informal, open-air lunch outside the Duomo in Florence at the 1985 meeting of the EDTA, attended by Vincenzo Cambi and the journal’s first editor-in-chief-to-be, Sandy Davison, and myself.

By this time, David was Dean of RPGMS, but he also served as Vice President of the meeting of the International Society of Nephrology, again in London, in 1987 – he had served as a council member in the ISN. He continued, later in his life, to support many aspects of nephrology in the UK, notably as president of the leading British research charity in renal disease, Kidney Research UK, from 2000–02.

He also had a long association with the Royal College of Physicians of London, which he served with distinction. He was invited, having been judged as the most promising brilliant new fellow, to give the Goulstonian lecture in 1968, and later he was also invited to give the Lumleian lecture in 1983. He served the college as censor in 1982–84, senior censor 1990–91, and was editor of the College Journal from 1994–98. He was also a fellow of the Edinburgh College of Physicians from 1967, and was nominated CBE by the Queen in 1991.

David was truly the nicest of men, remarkably modest despite his many achievements, and he possessed a dry sense of humour. He was always soft-spoken, but he had a determination to succeed and to complete his goals which governed everything he did. Underpinning and at the centre of David’s life was also his Christian faith; these values were evident to all who were privileged to have known David during his lifetime. For a time, he was a lay preacher in Newcastle.

Later in life he was troubled by deafness, but characteristically made light of this handicap. In 2007 he was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease, and early in 2008, at probably the last meeting to which he contributed [5], on the introduction and history of dialysis in the UK, he was forthright in announcing this to us, his friends and colleagues at the meeting. Nevertheless, he was determined to contribute to any occasion he thought important. He was a delight to know, and an unbearable loss.

He is survived by Eleanor, his wife of 53 years, three children and four grandchildren. He will always be remembered fondly, not only by his family but by his many colleagues, pupils and friends all over the globe.

REFERENCES