

PROFESSOR RONALD FINN (1930-2004)

Ronald Finn was a medical historian in many senses. Absolutely he helped to create the medical history of the Twentieth Century, by his research into a major cause of foetal mortality, haemolytic disease of the newborn. This, by itself has resulted in the saving of lives, globally, and incrementally in their millions. He was a physician of high renown, fascinated by history but also by the reasons behind the historical process.

Ronnie's curious mind, and an early awareness of the incongruities of history are shown in an anecdote about a school trip to Paris that he himself recounted decades later. He visited a museum, and in one room was surrounded by paintings about Napoleon's battles: Marengo, Austerlitz, Jena, etc. But Ronnie was puzzled. He approached the Attendant and asked: 'Excusez moi, Monsieur, ou est le battle de Waterloo?' It may be said that much of Ronnie's personality and indeed genius could be encapsulated in that encounter.

He was born in Liverpool, educated at Liverpool University, employed as a junior doctor at Sefton General Hospital and in the Liverpool Royal Infirmary, and then recruited in 1958 by Professor (later Sir) Cyril Clarke as Research Fellow to work on the possible genetic basis for Rhesus-related (Rh) haemolytic disease of the newborn. Any foetus has genes from both parents. This is Nature's own 'transplant experiment'. Foetal genes (in this case Rh genes) on the foetal red blood cells can be incompatible with mother. If these cross the placenta at the time of delivery, mother will be sensitized. Mother then develops antibodies which leak back in subsequent pregnancies and destroy other foetal red blood cells, by haemolysis. This condition results in severe anaemia leading to foetal death, or severe disability in surviving infants. Before the work in Liverpool it claimed many lives.

Ronnie had had no experience in this field. But after the usual footwork with blood samples and results, and then the analyses, he noticed an anomaly: only one in twenty (5 per cent) of all Rh incompatible pregnancies resulted in disaster. Rather than looking at the smaller group, Ronnie focussed on the larger, where there had seemed to be no problem. This may be called the '*Silver Blaise*' effect, after the 'dog in the night' conundrum that Sherlock Holmes faced, in Arthur Conan Doyle's mystery. Examination of the data revealed the cause: these parents were also incompatible for the major ABO blood groups. Thus mother already had antibodies in place to destroy leaking foetal red cells, was not sensitised against the Rh antigen, and the foetus was protected. The disease was ultimately prevented by generating anti-Rh antibodies in healthy male volunteers, then harvesting the antibodies, and giving these to susceptible mothers at the time of delivery, thus

preventing sensitisation, and protecting later pregnancies. This work was rewarded some twenty years later by the Lasker prize (the American equivalent of the Nobel) jointly to Ronnie and to Sir Cyril Clarke.

For anyone else, that advance alone might have been once enough for one lifetime. But Ronnie's interests both inside and outside medicine were undiminished with time. These included nephrology (in 1978 he provided much needed support for the embryological Satellite haemodialysis development, that transformed the prospects for renal failure patients in Liverpool, much ahead of Manchester); he also engineered (as Clinical Director, 1986-96) the transfer of the Renal Unit from Sefton General to the Royal Liverpool Hospital. As Immunologist and Environmentalist he helped to establish the British Society for Allergy, Environmental and Nutritional Medicine and continued to study the effects of dietary therapy in food allergy.

He was fiercely supportive of local initiatives, local history, and the use of the oral tradition. He was an excellent raconteur. With a slow, deliberate, but perfectly timed delivery, he regaled a generation of medical students with tales of Dr. Baker-Bates, a local medical legend, who bridged the historical gap between Lord Cohen of Birkenhead and Cyril Clarke. One of these stories featured an eminent member of the present Medical Establishment, then a House Officer in the old Liverpool Royal Infirmary. It also involved the Matron, a mirror of undetermined length, a set of opened trouser buttons, at the front, and a resignation (by B-B) which was then withdrawn, all within 24 hours.

In later years he served as Chairman of the Archives Committee of the Liverpool NHS Trusts (in succession to the late Professor Paul Hair, founding member and Chairman for many years of the LMHS), and on the LMHS Committee. For his lifetime contribution to research and teaching he was awarded the prestigious Visiting Chair in Medicine at the University of Liverpool. His last contribution was to an LMHS Meeting, on advances in Medicine in the North-West, when he again reported the triumphs of the region, but pointed out the roles of serendipity and alternative thinking, in contrast to 'conventional wisdom'. This will be published shortly in the Bulletin.

Mike Bone
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