# Professor Rodney Harris, CBE

***Emeritus Professor of Medical Genetics, Manchester (b May 1932; q Liverpool 1958), died 7th December 2017***

During the war years Rodney's family who were from an immigrant Jewish background moved constantly to avoid the bombs, on one occasion narrowly escaping disaster when the house on the Wirral suffered a direct hit. Finally the family lodged in Penmaenmawr in a small terrace just below the quarry. His father was in the RAF and the family in the Welsh speaking village were referred to as "the Chinese". Eventually passing the 11plus exam on the second attempt education continued at John Bright's Grammar school Llandudno. There he received inspirational teaching from the biology master and botany mistress supplemented by many hours spent alone in the town library. The final school year was at Quarry Bank High School in Liverpool.

Lacking the confidence to apply for medicine he spent the first year at Liverpool University in the Dental school. Applying for medicine to the Dean he was told he would need a good intercalated BSc. Fortunate in his choice of anatomy he was guided by the young Professor RG Harrison. A first class honours 1.1 degree secured a place at Liverpool medical school. Totally deaf since birth in the left ear, hearing was further compromised by severe infection in the right ear. This made clinical medicine difficult and the rigors of the Royal College of Physicians exam proved too challenging when asked to interpret heart sounds and percuss a chest.

Following house jobs he completed the Diploma in Tropical Medicine receiving the Warrington Yorke medal and left for the Niger Delta to study children with G6PD deficiency and falciparum malaria. He was accompanied by his first wife Ruth a nurse who had come to England from Germany as a refugee on the kinder transport in 1939. This work gained him an MD in 1961. Soon afterwards he travelled to South West Africa [now Namibia] as a Darwin Research Fellow to study the genetics of skin colour in the Yellow Bushmen of the Kalahari Desert. On his return to Liverpool he joined Sir Cyril Clarke's department as research became his major interest. Pursuing this he travelled to Leiden to study the histocompatibility antigens and then to Paris where he joined Nobel prize winner Jean Dausset's department helping to establish the genetics of the HLA system. His work on HLA led to an invitation in 1968 from Professor Douglas Black to take up a post as Reader in Medical Genetics in Manchester and to set up the tissue typing laboratory for renal transplantation. As a consultant physician at Manchester Royal Infirmary he had four inpatient beds. A noisy ward precluded consultation and conversation with patients and his work focused increasingly on medical genetics and research on HLA associations. He lectured widely in the UK and abroad and confessed to answering the questions he hoped he had been asked as he was rarely able to hear those from the audience.

Later in his career his interests and talents were directed to the national scene as developments in genetics impacted on many branches of clinical medicine. He used his energy and redoubtable political skills combined with a vision of NHS service development to build a strong foundation in this emerging discipline. He was Chairman of the Standing Advisory Committee in Clinical Genetics, Chairman of the Royal College of Physicians Clinical Genetics Committee, President of the Clinical Genetics Society and Consultant Adviser in Genetics to three Chief Medical Officers. He used hearing loops and an increasing variety of complex microphones at meetings. He obtained special medical development funding for the genetic centres in Manchester, Cardiff and The Institute of Child Health London to develop molecular genetic testing and to promote integrated genetic services with clinical and laboratory genetics "under one roof". He developed the role of genetic counsellors in the UK leading to the first MSc course in genetic counselling established in Manchester. It was clear that rapid advances in genetics would necessitate sub specialization in other disciplines and Rodney promoted this within his own department especially cancer, audiology and cardiology. He was Chairman of the Royal College of Physicians committee when it produced influential reports including the guide for commissioners at the time of the purchaser – provider split. Following Ruth's early death in 1975 he married Hilary a GP who assisted with many published studies in the role of primary care in the provision of genetic services, both in the UK and Europe.

During the 1980s Rodney struggled with increasing deafness. Alerted to an article about Hearing Dogs for Deaf People he applied in 1990 and thus began a very rewarding partnership with Jodie a trained Hearing Dog. For seventeen years she was his constant companion helping with the problems of isolation and enabling him to work on till retirement in 1997. Jodie's jacket provided a visible reminder of an often hidden disability. Rodney became a Trustee for Hearing Dogs and a lifetime supporter.

In 1995 he was awarded a CBE for services to medicine. In retirement he continued for five years as project leader and author of an EU funded project Concerted Action on Genetic Services in Europe in 17 European countries. The most important outcome of this report was the recognition of medical genetics as a specialty for the first time in a number of European countries.

When told that he might become totally deaf he had a successful cochlear implant at the age of 81 performed by Professor Richard Ramsden.

He leaves his wife Hilary and three children, Alexandra a dermatologist, Richard a qualified pharmacist, now a gardener and Anne who has a degree in English.

Rodney Harris CBE, Emeritus Professor of Medical Genetics Manchester born 27th May 1932. Died on 7th December 2017 from cerebrovascular disease at home in Knutsford Cheshire.

Alexandra Harris [daughter]