

MR ROGER HANIF ARMOUR, CONSULTANT SURGEON

Mr Roger Hanif ARMOUR ChM FRCP FRCS FRCSEd DTM&H. Born 19 August 1934. Consultant Surgeon, St. Catherine's Hospital, Birkenhead, Victoria Central Hospital, Wallasey and Birkenhead Children's Hospital, and later at Lister Hospital, Stevenage. Died 17 September 2020.



The Oration at his Life Membership award in December 2011 described his career most concisely and we reproduce it below, slightly amended and updated.

Roger Hanif Ahmed was born near Peshawar in what was then part of British India, but which subsequently became part of the Republic of Pakistan. His father was Indian and was a veterinary surgeon who qualified at the Royal College of Veterinary Science London. His mother was English. Roger went to school initially in Kidderminster where he developed a strong Birmingham accent. This disappeared after they all moved back to the Northwest Frontier.

At school Roger was an outstanding pupil and an accomplished pianist, hockey player and swimmer. In 1956 he qualified at the King Edward Medical College, Lahore. The course was very much on the English model, but with some additions which you would not have got in Liverpool. As a final year student he did clinics in a slum, prescribing medicines provided by the Red Cross, and he is still haunted by his memories of a journey on horseback through floodwater to inoculate the children in a school for the deaf against cholera and typhoid.

Roger returned to London in 1956. He did house jobs in Beverley and Hitchin. In the North Herts Hospital, Hitchin in 1957 he met and married Gillian, a staff nurse in the theatres. He then did an SHO job in ophthalmology in Hull. It was perhaps there that he started to develop what seems to have been a lifelong obsession with the eye and the ophthalmoscope.

There followed A&E and Surgical Registrar jobs in Maidenhead, Berkshire. In 1960 he became a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh and in 1961 a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons of England. In that year Roger and Gillian moved to Ormskirk, and subsequently with their young family to Bromborough on The Wirral. Roger says that he came to Liverpool because he wanted to do neurosurgery and thoracic surgery as part of his training, Liverpool had a ChM degree which was open to non-Liverpool graduates, and his brother David was a final year medical student here.

Roger was a Registrar in Cardiothoracic Surgery and then Registrar and Senior Registrar in Neurosurgery and General Surgery. It was a time of enormous application and achievement: ChM Liverpool 1965, DTM&H Liverpool 1965, MRCP London 1968. As if this wasn't enough he was a member of the Walton Hospital Swimming Team and won the Regional Championship in 1963. His ChM thesis was entitled "Anterior cerebral aneurysm, with special reference to the anterior communicating aneurysm and its treatment by occlusion of one anterior cerebral artery."

He regards this time with Alan Sutcliffe Kerr, Richard Hannah and Broni Sedzimir at the Regional Neurosurgical Unit at Walton as a model of how surgeons should be trained, although he still can't work out how Alan Sutcliffe Kerr could be such a good surgeon and at the same time such an appalling driver.

He remembers Robin Downie coming along the main corridor at Walton pretending to be severely disabled and asking "Am I an orthopaedic failure or a neurosurgical success?"

His personal qualities opened doors. He looked at tumours with Winston Evans at the Northern, Charles St Hill told his lab staff at the Southern that Mr Armour was to have access to anything that he wanted, he tried out new procedures in the post mortem room, and he did 73 carotid and vertebral angiograms with Joe Occleshaw the neuroradiologist at Walton.

James Carmichael remembers him as a frequent visitor to the X-Ray department at Broadgreen. Roger would say "You may be right but..." And there would follow a detailed list of facts demolishing the other hypothesis.

Cliff Sissons supplied him with medical cases to look at before he did the MRCP. Would any of this be possible now?

With the support of the consultants, he and his fellow trainee Reg Crosbie started to carry out new vascular surgical techniques together, including repair of abdominal aortic aneurysms. Their first aneurysm repair patient came back 20 years later and insisted that his ingrowing toenail should be operated on only by Mr Crosbie or Mr Armour, both of whom had long since moved on.

At that time in the Southern Hospital there was a young Anthony Seaton, then a humble Medical Registrar, but subsequently Director of the Institute of Occupational Medicine at Edinburgh, Professor Medicine at Aberdeen and Editor of Thorax and President of the British Thoracic Society. At his instigation Roger and Reg Crosbie also started to carry out pulmonary embolectomies, having first perfected the technique in the PM room.

The principles and some of the techniques which he had learnt in neuro and thoracic surgery were carried over and used throughout his career. He was also one of the first general surgeons to use a head light and magnifying loupes for operating in dark narrow spaces and on delicate tissues.

In 1967 Roger changed his surname from Ahmed to Armour. He had decided on a career in general and vascular surgery and competition was so severe that he thought that an outsider like himself would stand no chance.

However, in April 1969 he was appointed Consultant General Surgeon to St Catherine's Hospital, Birkenhead, Victoria Central Hospital Wallasey and Birkenhead Children's Hospital. These were three of the small hospitals later to be replaced by Arrowe Park.

Reg Crosbie had been appointed to some of the same hospitals a year or so earlier and they continued to work closely together, meeting to discuss their failures. Roger says that these were sessions of confession, healing and determination to do better, and were far superior to the audit meetings that came a quarter of a century later.

Attempts to co-ordinate rotas between hospitals failed. In hospitals which lacked experienced trainees, he was on call almost every night, often for more than one hospital. This comes not from Roger but from others who worked in the Wirral Hospitals at that time. The hospitals were not staffed, equipped, organized or funded for the sort of surgery that he had been trained to do. Liverpool had given him a first class training but was unable to provide this quite exceptional surgeon with a job commensurate with his skills. In 1972 Roger moved to a consultant post in the Lister Hospital, Stevenage, where he was able to practice general surgery and to develop his specialty of vascular surgery for the next twenty four years until his retirement in 1996.

Roger has published widely and has won a Hamilton Bailey Travelling Prize to Nashville, Tennessee and Katonsspital, Zurich to study vascular and microsurgery and a BMA award to study ruptured abdominal aortic aneurysm.

Throughout his working life he has pursued continuity of care, relief of post-operative pain, conservation of blood during operations and reduction of wastage in the NHS. He has always applied Lord Cohen's dictum "The feasibility of an operation is not necessarily an indication for its performance."

In retirement he claims to have failed at golf, gardening and helping with the housework. He has resumed his longstanding interest in the ophthalmoscope which he has always thought, with its multiple lenses, was never really mastered by many doctors. With black card, reflecting paper and a pen torch, for a total cost of 75p, he assembled a simpler ophthalmoscope with which he obtained sharply focused views of the retinae of Gillian, Tabley his Persian cat, a racing pigeon and a rainbow trout and his own diabetic retinopathy. This has now been manufactured as a pen-sized, lens free ophthalmoscope, although sadly, the cost is now much more than 75p. The ophthalmoscope has won several awards including the 2005 Edward de Bono Medal for Lateral Thinking. Following the ophthalmoscope, there has been a pinhole photomicroscope and a pocket slit lamp.

Roger and Gillian have three children who work in the pharmaceutical industry, in nursing and computers. His brother, David retired as Head of Surgery at the Regina Hospital, Saskatchewan, and died in January 2020. I know that Roger would want me to pay tribute to Gillian, his wife for the last 62 years (in 2020), without whom he feels that he could never have achieved anything.

I will leave the last words to his surgical colleague, Reg Crosbie "Roger was first and foremost a very gentle, kind doctor. He was also an excellent practical surgeon and a first class colleague.

Dr Bill Taylor

He remained a member of the Association of British Neurological Surgeons, recommended that they had a Society tie and received a complementary one! 50 years after his Membership, the Royal College of Physicians elected him a Fellow and he and Gillian travelled to London for the ceremony in July 2018. He continued experimenting with and improving his ophthalmoscopes and pin-hole cameras. During the last decade one of us corresponded with him on topics as diverse as the early history of his beloved Neurosurgical Unit at Walton and the derivation of Planck's constant. He always retained a great interest in LMI and its future. His later years were troubled by diabetes and increasingly severe cardiac disease.

He is survived by his wife, Gillian, and their children Jasmin, Sara and Steven and his much-loved grandchildren Daniel and James.

Jasmin Armour
Nick Clitherow