

Clifton College Chapel

Friday 8th September

I think that it is quite unusual for a successor to be asked to talk about career of the Consultant he replaced but I am flattered and grateful for this opportunity. It also seems strange that, in view of Alastair's comments, I should be standing here with a beard!

Gordon Thomson, affectionately known as GT by all at work had the following degrees:

MB BS 1945, DMRD 1948, MD 1950, MRCP 1952 - FRCP 1971, FRCR 1975

Despite the apparent normality of these qualifications for a highly regarded radiologist the opportunities for training just after the war were very different and he acquired his diplomas in a rather different manner to the current highly regimented training system.

Gordon qualified from Barts in 1945 and was posted to the RAF, where he worked at Princess Mary's Hospital, RAF Halton. RAF Halton was (and is) a major training base, near to Aylesbury. It primarily trains staff in support roles and had, until 1995, a hospital on site. It was here that Gordon trained in radiology, travelling to The Middlesex Hospital for physics training, qualifying DMRD in 1948. At that time the possession of the DMRD (Diploma in Medical Radio Diagnosis) was the qualification that allowed entry into the consultant grade. Following a posting somewhere in Lancashire Gordon moved to Barts to obtain the MRCP which he achieved in 1952.

Successful in that, he went to The National Hospital, Queen Square to train in Neuroradiology with James Bull & Hugh Davies. Radiology at Queen Square was advancing rapidly under the enthusiastic control of James Bull. Eric Lysholm from The Karolinska Hospital in Stockholm had helped set up what was to become the foremost training centre for neuroradiology in Britain, if not Europe (and which now carries his name). It is worth reflecting, in our current times of high quality scanners and other technology, that neuroradiology in the '50's was a much more challenging specialty. I know that there are many very eminent radiologists from other spheres in the chapel today but I think that they would agree that the challenge of performing and interpreting neuroimaging studies at that time made many look on the specialty as the pinnacle of radiology.

Following his time at Queen Square he went to Oxford but for reasons that are not entirely clear Gordon did general radiology there before being appointed Consultant at Frenchay in 1956 - 50 years ago. This general experience was to stand him in good stead in future years.

Up until Gordon's arrival at Frenchay all the imaging had been performed by the two rather domineering neurosurgeons of the day, George Alexander & Douglas Philips. He

wrested control away from them by demonstrating the added value of the radiologist, making himself indispensable. With the arrival of Alan Hulme and then Huw Griffith the neuroscience unit went from strength to strength and was able to get a very early CT scanner in 1974.

It was at about this time that the professor of radiology in Bristol, Howard Middlemiss, became concerned that Gordon did not hold the FRCR (Fellowship of the Royal College of Radiologists). Gordon was not very sympathetic to Professor Middlemiss's problems, which were resolved by the award of the Fellowship without examination in 1975. Gordon thus was rather unusual in being elected to the Fellowship of the Royal college of Physicians before becoming a FRCR!

Subsequent developments at Frenchay, vigorously supported by Huw Griffith, included the Meditech CT scanner development, which resulted in one of his relatively few papers. It is nice to observe that two of the co-authors are in the congregation today (Joy Fowles and John Bradshaw). The paper was published in the British Journal of Radiology.

When we look at the current drive of juniors (and seniors) to publish, and the importance of such publications to advancement, we need to remember that this pressure was much less at that time. Gordon published only a few papers (by current standards) but these were of high quality. Indeed I found a reference to a paper he published in the Journal of Bone and Joint Surgery (Britain) in 1968 on spinal stenosis that was still being referenced in 1999.

Alongside this highly technical and admired neuroradiology he also had a general radiology practice in Bristol. Part of this practice included domiciliary radiology, travelling to the patient's home to take simple x-rays. He was happy to recall an occasion when he was summoned to attend His Grace, the Duke of Beaufort, at Badminton house. His Grace (the old duke) had been pursuing the fox, as was his passion, when he fell from his horse, sustaining an injury that required x-raying. Gordon was summoned and arrived at the front entrance to Badminton house where he announced himself as the "Consultant Radiologist". Gordon recounted that the rather crusty butler looked down his nose and merely announced "tradesmen round the back". On obtaining admission "round the back" Gordon then found that none of the electrical supply at the house had been updated to the square pin standard, resulting in Gordon having to rush back to the Hospital to find an adaptor!

I first met Gordon in 1977 when I arrived at Frenchay as a neurosurgical SHO. Over the next few years Gordon was a great help to me in advising me about radiology. His decision to retire as late as he could from the NHS also ensured that his post came up just when I was looking.

Following retirement from the NHS in 1987 he was kept busy, both clinically and with the emerging technology of MRI. In the years up to retirement he had been heavily involved with Terry Beddoe, Clive Johnston and Paul Goddard in setting up the Bristol MRI Centre charity, culminating in the purchase and installation of a top of the range MR

scanner in 1987. The scanner itself was the idea of philanthropist John James, given to the people of Bristol on the understanding that they needed to raise the money to house and run it. The four trustees (and again it is a pleasure to see that both surviving trustees are here today) set about this with characteristic vigour, ensuring the success of the project.

Raising the money to keep this running was a major undertaking, involving visits to all sorts of places where money was raised. On one occasion Gordon went to a pub to collect money from a bikers club. He was taken to a barn behind the pub where he described the alternative appearance of bearded, leather jacketed, bikers. A significant sum had been raised and this prompted Gordon to observe that "I will really have to change my view about them". What is it about beards?

Fundraising continued and a 2nd scanner was purchased and installed in 1991 and subsequently upgraded. Gradually the pressures of hospital service meant that the stand-alone nature of the Bristol MRI Centre would change, with all the Bristol Hospitals requiring scanners within the main hospital buildings. The legacy of the Bristol MRI Centre is the high quality provision now enjoyed by patients and radiologists within Bristol and the high international standing of those radiologists who had the opportunity to develop their skills in the area before most other centres had access.

Despite the loss of his major retirement interest he continued to take an interest in all things radiological, visiting the department as late as last year and expressing amazement at the technological advances.

Gordon had a long career in medicine and was involved in all the major developments in Neuroradiology. He was a founder member of the British Society of Neuroradiology (but never held office in it or any other body) and hosted the 1981 meeting. His interests were in the practical application of his skills. While looking through his career I found that he motto of RAF Halton is "Teach, Learn, Apply" ; I think that this very well represents his approach.

I want to leave you with the recollections of Gordon as a man and doctor from a few of his colleagues (who shall be nameless as they represent a common view). I will always remember him as courteous and helpful (even as a lowly SHO in a different specialty) and I will always be grateful for his support in developing my career.

Other comments that I would like to pass on include:

"It didn't matter what hour of the day or night you got hold of GT - he was always calm, always polite, always giving good advice"

"He never had a "side", never showed off and hated to have to be firm"

"In all my years working with him we only had one major disagreement, he was the perfect colleague"

"An absolute gentleman - the most perfect man I ever met"

It is by these comments that we remember departed friends and Gordon's memory will remain for long as a charming, unfailingly helpful and wise clinician and friend.

Thank you

Dr Tim Lewis

Department of Neuroradiology

Frenchay Hospital