

Geoffrey Donald Oates FRCS : distinguished Birmingham surgeon who became the first President of the Association of Coloproctology of Great Britain and Ireland. 1929-2013

Geoff Oates died suddenly in Switzerland, aged 84, on November 2nd 2013 on route from his adopted home in Verbier to attend the British Association of Surgical Oncology. He was armed with his hand-written Christmas cards (for postage in England), subsequently posted by Liz who had to add a note on each envelope that Geoff had died suddenly en route. He would have been very disappointed at the added cost at having to post them in Switzerland due to the sudden change in events !!. In the cards that we both received he related that he and Liz were in great health but that he might not make it to a meeting we were attending in St Gallen a few weeks later as he was cutting down on his travelling.

Geoffrey Donald Oates was born in Wolsingham, County Durham on the 16th May 1929. His father was Headmaster and his Mother an English teacher in his school thereby instilling in him the importance of education and training which remained a focal point throughout his life. Whilst he distinguished himself academically, in order to offset the stigma of this parental burden, he excelled at numerous sports throughout his school. His university undergraduate and postgraduate career was peppered with numerous prizes and accolades, amongst then a First Class Honours, Intercalated Degree in Anatomy and Physiology in Birmingham in 1950. He went on to complete his Undergraduate Medical Career in Birmingham and subsequently pursued postgraduate surgical training and ultimately a life-time surgical career in Birmingham. He combined his roles of Consultant Surgeon, Senior Clinical Lecturer in the University of Birmingham with a six year spell as Chairman of the Division of Surgery of the United Birmingham Hospitals. He remained a true “Birmingham Man” through the many re-configurations of the NHS, and Birmingham Health Care, throughout the years.

His formative years in surgical training instilled in him a lifelong interest in the treatment of cancer and a key part of this was the year he spent with Professor Warren Cole in the University of Illinois, Chicago, USA as a Research fellow and Instructor in Surgery. His work on experimental and clinical aspects of tumour metastases set the scene for a life-long career in pursuit of optimal outcomes for patients with cancer.

Geoff was one of the first surgeons in England to introduce the concept of “Surgical Oncology” and was passionate in pursuit of optimal surgery and “multidisciplinary care” of patients with cancer, particularly for breast and colorectal cancer, long before the concept of Multidisciplinary Team Cancer care evolved. He did not “rest on his laurels” and was pivotal in promoting these principles by founding the Oncology Section of the Royal Society of Medicine, The British Association of Surgical Oncology and his pride and joy the Association of Coloproctology of Great Britain and Ireland (ACPGBI). His determination, leadership and respect amongst his peers meant that he was the unanimous choice for the Inaugural President of the ACPGBI in 1990, and from there the ACPGBI has grown to become a major international force in the management of diseases of the colon and rectum. It was his vision that the Association should not to be restricted to surgeons but should embrace all the medical specialties involved, the nurses, the pathologists, the radiologists etc. It was also his vision that all those involved from every country in these islands should be incorporated together, which has been one of the greatest strengths of this important association - it is indeed the Association of Coloproctology in Great Britain and Ireland.

His many sporting achievements in Cricket, Hockey, Squash, and latterly skiing (which he started aged 53), were overshadowed by his true love as goalkeeper in the Birmingham University First XI and for numerous other football teams thereafter including Corinthian Casuals with whom he played in the Amateur Cup Final. He often reflected to his friends about the special qualities of a goalkeeper that also apply in the field of surgery – “the final responsibility”, “the weight of blame”, “the loneliness of carrying the can”. But he also realised that the goalkeeper had a key role in keeping a calm head and encouraging, organizing and directing the flow of the game and the structure of the team, qualities he brought to the care of his patients and his broader view of the need for multidisciplinary care and the fellowship of societies that he moulded.

He served as a Captain in the RAMC as part of his National Service in Korea and Japan between 1955 and 1957. During this time he developed Pulmonary Tuberculosis, eventually cured by Streptomycin, though he developed Streptomycin induced toxicity with a degree of permanent high tone deafness. This disability he turned into an asset with what many would say a “selective hearing loss” when the need arose!

Predeceased by his first wife Mollie who died in 1971, he is survived by Liz whom he married in 1973 and by his two children from his marriage to Mollie (John who is a

Consultant ENT Surgeon and a Leading Expert on Otology and his daughter Sue), and his two grandchildren Polly and Henry.

In true Geoff style he documented much of this detail, and more, in November 2011 in the “Lives of the Fellows” of The Royal College of Surgeons of England, a resource that has been invaluable in preparing this document and can be easily accessed for a more detailed biography.

Our abiding memories are of a man who was known and liked all over the world, never afraid to speak his mind, and enjoyed the company of others wherever he was. His legacy to surgical oncology has spearheaded many of the developments in cancer care in the UK and the world at large and though we miss his presence his achievements persist and will prosper.

Brendan Moran

January 2014