

Dr John O'Donel Alexander

1915 – 2003

John (Jack) O'Donel Alexander was born in Cork in 1915, son of the professor of Civil Engineering, and qualified as a doctor in Birmingham in 1938. He had a long and varied career.

Jack was five when his father died, and he was brought up by relatives at a farm in Donegal. He thought of becoming a farmer, but was advised to go in for Medicine. After qualifying, Jack served in the RAMC, as a doctor in the Middle East. Subsequently, for a time Jack tried to combine being a farmer and a GP, but ultimately, he decided that the combination was too much. He was offered a training post in dermatology at the Glasgow Royal Infirmary and decided regretfully to forgo farming. His future seemed secure, but his failure to get the MRCP meant that he was not eligible to become a Consultant Dermatologist, and so he spent many years as an SHMO. Eventually it became blindingly obvious that he was doing the work of a Consultant Dermatologist in every way. He was installed as a consultant; but there was a final twist that rankled – he had to resign as an SHMO and then apply for his old job back again, but as a consultant.

Jack was a determined person although normally he was peaceable, and always kind-hearted. There was an occasion when he felt that a certain pillar of the dermatological establishment had not handled some patients particularly well; and Jack said so – an act of considerable courage when juniors feared reprisals if they upset a senior.

Jack's outstanding quality was enthusiasm, occasionally outrunning common sense, but moderation reigned usually. The Department would have been the poorer for want of Jack's ideas and suggestions. For example, the curtains round a patient's bed

destroyed any hope of being able to see the skin clearly; all was gloom and uncertainty. With the aid of a helpful administrator, fluorescent lights, and then the curtains seemed to augment rather than decrease visibility. On the other hand, Jack's keenness for clinicians to be involved in laboratory research was less successful, since we lacked the expertise and backing to make it succeed. Another project with the same basic purpose did succeed. A lecture room/library for weekly academic meetings was made in an area where there was said to be no room, by enclosing a space existing between the indented outside wall of the building. This vital activity would have been impossible without Jack's inventive mind.

The Department with Jack in it was a happy place in which to work. He got on well with people and helped to create a harmonious activity. He was interested in the history of dermatology in the West of Scotland, while the Glasgow Royal Infirmary was always at the centre of his affection. He was interested in dermatitis herpetiformis, resulting in greatly improved management of such patients and also in a book on the subject. His last book on Arthropods in Dermatology was his magnum opus; it is the piece of work by which he deserves to be remembered.

Jack was essentially a naturalist in the tradition of his boyhood hero, J.H. Fabre, the famous French entomologist. Both men can truly be called amateurs, meaning that they love their work for its intrinsic interest. He had many interests: he liked gardening, he played golf badly but joyously, he collected stamps, he was interested in sport, he liked novels, especially those containing Irish characters, he enjoyed hearing and telling jokes, the wittier the better, he was a keen croquet player



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and started a club for the juniors. When his beloved wife Isobel died he took up cooking. He cooked, inter alia, to entertain, and therefore kept in touch with younger dermatologists. A host of people will regret his passing, in addition to his patients, as someone who made the world a better place. He was indeed a good and faithful servant, and such are more precious than gold.

Dr Alan Lyell

Scotland