

Neil Harrison Cox

MB ChB BSc (Hons) FRCP

1956 – 2009

Neil Cox, consultant dermatologist at Cumberland Infirmary, Carlisle, died on 8th December 2009, aged 53. He was an outstanding man whose multi-faceted talent included superb clinical, organisational, literary and editorial abilities.

Born in Leeds, a childhood indication of innate scientific curiosity was manifest in an episode when he was discovered pushing marbles into his younger brother's mouth. When asked why he was doing this he explained that he was interested in establishing how many it would hold. He was educated at Leeds Grammar School, and then trained in medicine at Liverpool Medical School, excelling as an undergraduate. After junior posts at Liverpool hospitals, he was appointed registrar in dermatology to Professor Rona MacKie in Glasgow, and subsequently senior registrar to Professor Sam Shuster in Newcastle. He became consultant dermatologist at Cumberland Infirmary, Carlisle, in 1990. Thereafter, he embarked on a career that established him as a shining light in UK dermatology. He was not only outstanding as a clinical dermatologist, with an encyclopaedic knowledge, but was also well versed in dermatological science. His input was also invaluable as member/chairman of numerous national, regional and local committees, including the BAD Therapy Guidelines Committee (chairman 1999–2003), BAD Provision of Care Task Force, and the UK Dermatology Clinical Trials Network Executive. In recent years he was president of the Royal Society of Medicine Dermatology section, and editorial representative. His numerous awards included the BAD Wycombe Prize for Dermatological Research in a District General Hospital, on two occasions, and Hospital Doctor Team of the Year winner in 1999.

In addition to considerable clinical and administrative commitments, Neil devoted a huge amount of time and effort to writing, reviewing and editorial work. He was punctilious as an editor, and would often spend hours revising a manuscript himself, rather than asking an author to do so, because he knew from experience that the end result

would be infinitely better. He was a perfectionist, a consummate dotter of the 'i' and crosser of the 't'.

As well as authorship or co-authorship of countless journal articles and letters, he was an associate editor and then co-editor of the British Journal of Dermatology, in the days when the individuals preparing its content consisted of the editor(s) and a secretary. He also made invaluable contributions as an author and editor to two editions of Rook's Textbook of Dermatology. In addition, he co-authored Physical Signs in Dermatology (Society of Authors Medical Atlas Prize, 1994), Diseases of the Skin (BMA Book Prize – Dermatology Book of the Year, 2006), Diagnostic Picture Tests in Dermatology, and Diagnostic Problems in Dermatology. He was also co-author of several contributions to UK National Guidelines on dermatological disease management.

But there was also a lighter side to his literary output. One creative writing task that I think he probably enjoyed more than most was involvement with the journal Dermatology in Practice, which he edited for ten years. He produced an editorial for each issue, and these provided some indication of the breadth of his knowledge, and his sense of humour. It is often said that a title should titillate a reader's curiosity, and who could resist delving deeper into 'The communication of the dancing bomb-sniffer' (from which I learned of his interest in honeybees), or 'Performing seals and bedpans at dawn'. In 'Hedgehogs – from test tube to health hazard', he told of his experience of hedgehog rearing, and mentioned that he had only encountered hedgehog ringworm twice – once in a bald and scaly hedgehog, which wasn't unexpected, and once on the scalp of an elderly woman, who, he wrote, sadly did not admit to brushing her hair with a hedgehog.

He pointed out on another occasion that 'Readers of this column may not recognise that each of my offerings involves many hours of wading through



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trivia (and some serious stuff)..... All potential grist to my mill has to be carefully stored and collated (anybody who has seen the opencast filing in my office will know that I'm not being entirely truthful about the careful storage aspect). For any of you who have to live with an opencast filing system, it's a sign of a fertile mind.

But therein lay the manner of the man. His capacity for work was legendary, his knowledge immense. He always had a dozen-and-one deadlines to meet, and he met them. Whenever I telephoned to discuss anything he was always there, and we nattered about work, life, the universe and everything, but I suppose mainly about work, because there always seemed to be so much of it. All his productivity, which made a huge contribution to elevating the profile of British dermatology, was accomplished in the context of the clinical workload of a District General Hospital, the ubiquitous and pernicious NHS bureaucracy, and the debilitating effects of chronic ill health in recent years.

What spare time he had was spent salmon fishing and enjoying rock 'n' roll music and fine wines, and with his family – Fi, a veterinary surgeon, and children David and Kathy.

Neil was exceptional and irreplaceable, and his talents have been recognised by the posthumous award of the Sir Archibald Gray medal for outstanding services to dermatology.

Tony Burns

Emeritus Consultant Dermatologist
Leicester Royal Infirmary