

# Professor Ian Magnus

Born 27th October 1920 – Died 13 February 2006

Professor Ian Magnus, the clinical photobiologist who transformed his subject from idea to reality, has died aged 85 years. In fact, one of the major photobiological disorders he transformed in this way was erythropoietic protoporphyria (EPP), which he was the first to describe, in the *Lancet* in 1960.

Ian Magnus was born in Brighton in 1920, spending his first ten years in India in Calcutta where his father had commercial interests, and taking his vacations in the, according to him, idyllic surroundings of up-country Darjeeling. He returned to England for his schooling at Clifton College, Bristol, where he excelled as a musician, an interest he pursued throughout his life, as well as being a very capable cross country runner. He went up to Cambridge University in 1939, followed by clinical studies at St Thomas' Hospital, London, whence he graduated in medicine in 1944, before undertaking his house jobs also at St. Thomas' Hospital. At the end of World War II in 1945, he was posted to Cyprus as Medical Officer in the Guards Brigade and then Deputy Assistant Director of Medical Services, where he had a splendid time he said, before returning to the United Kingdom to become Registrar in Dermatology to the well-known Drs Edmund Moynihan and Louis Forman at Guy's Hospital in 1948. At Guy's, a chance meeting with Professor Robert Thompson then led to his being lured into research, eventually at the St. John's Institute of Dermatology, London, first as Senior Lecturer, where he remembers vividly the powerful influence at that time of Dr. Geoffrey Dowling on the advancement of dermatology. However, of more direct effect on him was Dr. Stephen Gold, who encouraged him to take over the running of the then embryonic Photobiology Unit, which

the far-sighted Dr. Arthur Porter had just established by setting up a prototype diagnostic and research tool, the skin irradiation monochromator, in spite of protestations from others in the scientific community who felt the device would be of little value. Somewhat hesitantly to begin with, Magnus went into the field, soon to make it his own, writing his doctoral thesis on the subject and studying in particular the cutaneous porphyrias. In this field, he rapidly proceeded to extend the work of Lang in Germany, whence came the discovery by Magnus of EPP, a major advance undertaken in collaboration with that other eminent porphyrinologist, Claude Rimington FRS. Studies in chemical and drug photosensitivity followed, before a move into the broader field of the then so-called idiopathic photodermatoses. As a result, he spawned in the United Kingdom the whole new concept of clinical photobiology, which has since been enthusiastically carried forward in leaps and bounds by the many to whom he was mentor and provider of an essential launching platform into the discipline. The Photobiology Unit now exists in fine fettle today at the St. John's Institute of Dermatology, St. Thomas' Hospital, London, where the studies he initiated and published widely on have been immeasurably expanded and continue to be so. Without the vision of Professor Ian Magnus, however, it could never have happened.

Professor Magnus was consulted in the 1960s during the development of the Concorde aircraft because of concerns about consequent ozone layer depletion and increased ultraviolet penetration to the earth's surface. He went on a test flight and survived, as for many years also did the aircraft! He was asked somewhat later too to go on the Michael



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Parkinson chat show concerning related matters but not even a personal call from the show host persuaded him to abandon his undemonstrative nature and he never appeared in front of the cameras.

In retirement, Professor Magnus enjoyed many other interests, not only passions for literature, particularly poetry, and above all music, but also the delights of sharing them with his family and promoting them wherever possible. He was a patron of several musical institutions, and supported many charities, particularly relating to medicine and world development. He was also extremely sociable and generous, if always somewhat retiring, such that after his frequent generous offers of hospitality to family and friends, he would unfailingly ply them with commemorative bottles or tasty food parcels to take on the homeward journey!

He is survived by his wife and five children.

**Professor John Hawk**

London