

# Dr John Savin

**1935-2006**

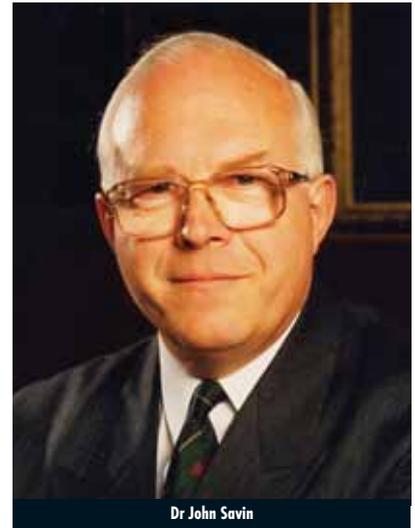
John Savin was a former consultant dermatologist to the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh and part-time senior lecturer to the Department of Dermatology, University of Edinburgh. A man of sharp intellect, his was a glittering career that showed promise from the start with scholarships at Epsom College, Trinity Hall, Cambridge (where he duly got a first) and St Thomas's Hospital. He sailed through his professional life with a minimum of fuss and a maximum of modesty.

John trained in London at St John's Hospital for Diseases of the Skin, St George's Hospital and St Thomas's Hospital under Doctors Calman, Meara, Gold, Dowling and Wallace. He arrived in Edinburgh in 1971, encouraged by PJ (Paddy) Hare, who had taken the Chair of Dermatology in Edinburgh in 1968. Both injected fresh blood into a department that, since its establishment in 1884, had been led by a succession of nine Edinburgh graduates. John was the consummate professional. He treated all patients - from Fife miners to peers of the realm - in the same way; that is with courtesy, interest and empathy. He was clinically very adept and had that enviable ability to recollect clinical signs that he had noted years previously and to relate them to the patient of the moment whose diagnosis was puzzling him or his colleagues. He was an extraordinarily astute observer and Sir William Osler would have been proud of him - "See and then reason, but see first". So would those under whose influence he trained. In the eyes of NHS administrators he must have been the perfect role model for a consultant - never off sick, always on time for

clinics, quick, efficient and attracting much praise and, perhaps more important nowadays, no complaints from patients!

John's great intellect and genuine scholarship were a formidable combination. He wrote in simple plain English. He was a master of prose and grammar; 'Keep the verbs strong and avoid the passive mode' was a frequent cry. We admired his turn of phrase and precision as well as his economy in stating complex medical issues. He had few rivals in editing texts that were incoherent and illogical into language that all could understand. He vetted hundreds of manuscripts, from local colleagues to national luminaries. 'Savinised', the word coined for this, soon became popular in the Edinburgh department and eventually further afield. He could focus on a topic, oblivious of the surroundings. He was even able to edit articles at his consulting room desk between seeing patients! Not surprisingly he was an associate editor of the British Journal of Dermatology for a number of years.

John was no mean teacher and clinical researcher. Many trainees fell under his benign spell and considered him to be their main mentor. His writing was prolific and reflected his broad interests - His MD thesis recorded his work on the cause of death of 285 patients with pemphigoid and pemphigus in England and Wales during the period 1962-1969. He wrote around 200 papers. His first, in 1963, announced the arrival of a young author with a way with words - "The rhythm of venereal infection in a ship's community"- written, as a surgeon lieutenant, for the Journal of the Royal Naval Medical Service. John's known



partiality for scabies caused him to see many itchy patients and led on to an interest in the physiology of itching and scratching that kept him amused, and onlookers impressed, for over 30 years. In 1973 it was he, with Ian Oswald and Bill Paterson, who first showed, by simultaneous observation and electroencephalography, that humans scratch (and presumably itch) during the different phases of sleep. The team spent long nights in one of the original sleep laboratories analysing literally miles of EEC recordings! He co-authored 7 books. 'Clinical Dermatology', written with John Hunter and Mark Dahl, will soon be in its fourth edition and sits on the desks of many general practitioners. John was nearly 60 when he developed an interest in applied genetics and, with Celia Moss, wrote the well received 'Dermatology and the New Genetics'. After retirement his output even accelerated. Over the last decade he wrote a succession of historical articles, three winning prizes in the USA. HL Mencken once said 'Never pick a fight with people who buy ink by the barrel'. Very few picked a fight with John because his publications were so painstakingly thought through and so carefully recorded. They will stand the test of time.

Although John denied it, he was probably even more competitive at work than he was at sport, and that is saying something! He clearly wanted to make his mark in national affairs of Dermatology. It came as little surprise when, in 1988, he was elected President of the Dermatological Section of The Royal Society of Medicine and, in 1992, President of the Dowling Club. He was always well prepared for meetings which he chaired with his distinctive avuncular wit and was an effective and popular president of both national bodies. But it will be for his unstinting service to the BAD that most dermatologists in the UK will remember him. In 1993 he became the first elected President of our association. His busy year included the purchase of our first headquarters in Fitzroy Square (acquired during a slump in London

property prices), the launching of a Strategic Working Party and the establishment of a Rapid Response Panel (often advising members how best to deal with emerging outreach clinics). John then went on to be Postgraduate Training Adviser to the BAD from 1994-1998. During 2005 and 2006 he wrote or edited no less than 90 patient information leaflets for the BAD. Each is a model of clarity and they are now available for all to see on the association's website.

Honours inevitably came his way. He was especially proud to be an Honorary Member of the BAD. He was a "Membre Correspondant Etranger" of the Société Française de Dermatologie et de Vénérologie and an Honorary Member of the Canadian Dermatology Association.

John was a keen golfer. His ample frame and short swing steered the

ball down the centre of most fairways at Bruntsfield, Muirfield and North Berwick and his putting was the coup de grâce for most opponents. He was Captain of The Royal Colleges of Scotland Golf Club in 2003.

John was blessed with a strong marriage to Patricia and a close family life. His short final illness was unexpected. At first he had difficulty coming to terms with it but, as in Life so with Death, John quickly regained command and faced the remaining days with reluctant acceptance of the inevitable, courage, dignity and humour. John will be sorely missed by Patricia, their two sons, two daughters and eight grandchildren and by countless friends and colleagues.

**Professor John Hunter**

Edinburgh