John Watson

Reconstructive plastic surgeon who advanced burns treatment

John Watson, who has died aged 94, was a leading member of the generation of plastic and reconstructive surgeons who trained under Archibald McIndoe at the Queen Victoria Hospital in East Grinstead. This was established as a national centre for service personnel, particularly air crew who had sustained burns or mutilating injuries during the second world war. Watson performed follow-up surgery on many of the former servicemen in Sir Archibald’s “guinea pig club.” Having watched Sir Archibald, whose dexterity was legendary, cut thin layers of skin for grafting, Watson modified the equipment to cut layers of even thickness. He later revealed that he got his inspiration when peeling potatoes at the kitchen sink.

Watson was born in Liverpool. His father died when he was 18 months old; his mother remarried and moved to Sussex. While at Leighton Park School, Reading, he built a television set that received one of Logie Baird’s experimental transmissions. He did his premedical studies at Jesus College, Cambridge, and qualified from Guy’s Hospital, London, in 1938, and his bachelor of medicine and surgery a year later.

Lying in a sampan

In 1939, when war was declared, he joined the volunteer reserve of the Royal Air Force and was commissioned a year later. He spent the first years of the war in Scotland and in 1944 was posted to India, Malaya, and Burma, where he was medical officer to service personnel and villagers. When damaged Allied aircraft trying to make their way home crashed in remote mountain areas, Watson hired local guides to row him, lying in a sampan, up river to bury the dead. He covered the graves with spikes of bent bamboo to deter jackals, and collected any personal belongings. He was twice mentioned in dispatches and was promoted to squadron leader.

The government had trained extra doctors during the war years, and in 1945, when he was demobilised, training posts were scarce. However, Watson obtained a studentship at the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh, qualifying as a fellow in 1946. He was then appointed resident surgical officer at the Prince of Wales Hospital, Tottenham, as assistant to Arthur Dickson Wright, the celebrated (sometimes intemperate) abdominal surgeon.

In private practice Dickson Wright shared an anaesthetist, John Hunter, with Archibald McIndoe, and through this connection Watson went to train under him at East Grinstead in 1947. He spent the rest of his career there, although he was also consultant to the London Hospital and honorary consultant to the King Edward VII Hospital for Officers.

He published numerous articles and papers on plastic surgery from 1949 onwards and contributed to symposiums and medical and nursing textbooks.

His colleagues regarded his greatest contribution as secretary and then president of the British Association of Plastic Surgeons, secretary general of the International Confederation of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgeons, and secretary of the East Grinstead Research Trust. He masterminded the establishment of what is now the Blond McIndoe Research Foundation. He was largely responsible for the trust’s fortune in having Peter Medawar as its scientific adviser and Arthur Porritt and Hedley Atkins as trustees.

Burns facility

He supervised the planning, commissioning, and funding of this most advanced facility in the United Kingdom for burns. He saw its research laboratories rise to international fame in several areas. These included tissue typing and transplantation immunology—the foundation did the tissue typing for the early heart transplants—and the birth of microvascular surgery. He was awarded ad eundem fellowship of the Royal College of Surgeons of England.

He had many other talents: he was a respected astronomer who advanced photoelectric astronomy techniques; constructed his own 10 inch telescope, grinding and polishing the lenses; and built and automated his observatory. An astronomy textbook had to be revised after Watson showed that some measurements were wrong. He built an orchid house where he grew spectacular plants, was a keen angler, kept bees, and made honey, a skill which he passed on to his three daughters. He was a capable man who could fix anything around the house and made the television set on which his family watched the coronation in 1952. He was loved by colleagues and patients alike and was involved in the training of many overseas doctors, by whom he was greatly respected.

Having survived treatment for malignancy and the results of a serious accident, he remained totally alert until his sudden death at home. His adored wife, June Stiles, a Women’s Auxiliary Air Force officer whom he married in 1941, died in July 2008. After that he lost heart and died of old age. Their daughters survive him. A son with Down’s syndrome predeceased him.

Tom Cochrane, Caroline Richmond

John Watson, consultant plastic surgeon (b 1914; q Cambridge and Guy’s Hospital, London, 1938), d 14 January 2009.

Tom Cochrane contributed to the obituary in the Telegraph.

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Stanley Allen

Former specialist in leg ulcers
Wandsworth (b 1930; q Trinity College, Dublin, 1953), d 24 February 2009.

After national service in the Far East, Stanley Allen joined his brother in general practice in Streatham. Interested in leg ulceration, he was for 40 years director of the leg ulcer clinic at the Battersea Central Mission. In 1975 he was appointed clinical assistant to the leg ulcer clinic at St James’s Hospital, Wandsworth, and then St George’s Hospital, Tooting, retiring after 25 years.

A founder member of the venous forum of the Royal Society of Medicine, he advocated specialist nurses in 1970 and taught over 30 000 nurses, this work being recognised in 1993 by a national training award. In 1994 he was made a freeman of the City of London. He never married.

Stanley Allen, Susan Collins

Sheila Margaret Child (née Mclean)

Former general practitioner and clinical assistant Wrexham (b 1948; q Manchester 1972; BSc, MRCGP), died from a retroperitoneal leiomyosarcoma on 1 March 2009.

After house jobs in Manchester, Sheila Margaret Child (née Mclean) worked for a year in the medical professorial unit in Dundee. She returned to Manchester Royal Infirmary to work in the endocrine unit, where she met her husband. Sheila then became principal general practitioner in north Manchester before moving to Wrexham, where she was first casualty officer in the War Memorial Hospital and then a general practitioner. With the birth of her son she became clinical assistant in the diabetes unit and in paediatric dermatology. She retired in 2001, having become disenchanted with the increasing bureaucracy of the health service. She leaves a husband, David, and a son.

David Child

Edward Bancroft Jarrett

Former consultant physician West Dorset Hospitals, Dorchester (b 1916; q Cambridge/St George’s Hospital, London, 1941; MA, MD, FRCP), d 8 January 2009.

Edward Bancroft Jarrett developed polio in 1937, which interrupted his studies for two years and left him having to use crutches. Appointed the first NHS consultant physician to West Dorset in 1950, he worked practically singlehanded for 17 years. He fought hard for a new hospital, built up a fine diabetic service, and served on various subcommittees for the regional board. He was a founder member of the Wessex Physician’s Club and was chairman 1959-63. He was retired by the NHS (as he put it) on his 65th birthday, and two years later died from stomach cancer on 20 February 2009. Nancy Loudon (née Mann) graduated with honours and trained in obstetrics and gynaecology in the professorial unit only to be forced to resign when she became engaged. She took up family planning and pioneered the contraceptive pill and intrauterine device, becoming a leading authority on family planning in the UK. A lecturer at Edinburgh University, she chaired the National Association of Family Planning Doctors, which helped establish the Faculty of Sexual and Reproductive Healthcare. After retirement, Nancy was vice chair of the Health Education Board for Scotland and awarded an OBE. She leaves a husband, John; two sons; and six grandchildren.

M E Jewsbury

Sheila Margaret Child

Nancy Loudon (née Mann)

Former medical coordinator Lothian Family Planning and Well Woman Services, Edinburgh (b 1926; q Edinburgh 1949; OBE, FRCP, FFSRH), died from stomach cancer on 20 February 2009.

Former consultant cardiothoracic surgeon Blackpool Victoria Hospital (b 1920; q Manchester 1944; MD, FRCS), d 17 December 2008.

Percy Jewsbury attended Manchester Grammar School from the age of 8 until he trained in medicine. On a studentship with the Rockefeller Foundation, he gained his MD at Minnesota University, returning in 1943 to qualify and gain the surgical prize. After training in general surgery and two years as a graded surgeon in the Royal Army Medical Corps Rhine Army, he switched to cardiothoracic surgery. He became consultant in Blackpool in 1955 and helped set up the open heart unit. His pioneering and collaborative approach, including visiting other national and international heart and surgical units, turned the hospital into a regional centre. He leaves a wife, Moira; three sons; and six grandchildren.

Robert Duncan McKendrick

Anaesthetist specialising in intensive care North West Deanery (b 1973; q Manchester 1999; BSc, FRCA), died in a road traffic crash on 15 July 2008.

Before studying medicine, Robert Duncan McKendrick (“Robbie”) obtained a first class degree in physiology at Newcastle University, where he met Jess, his future wife. He trained in anaesthesia in the North West Deanery and was part way through advanced training in intensive care. Well known in the region for his energy and exuberance, he always took his work seriously and was immensely self critical if he considered himself responsible for any deficiencies. A few weeks before his death he had returned from a charitable trip to India providing anaesthesia for cleft palate surgery. He leaves Jess and two sons.

Robert Thompson

Jess McKendrick

David Marshall Matthews

Consultant physician Monklands Hospital, Airdrie (b 1952; q Edinburgh 1976; FRCPEd, FRCPGlas), died from pulmonary embolism on 11 December 2008.

After postgraduate training in and around Edinburgh, David Marshall Matthews (“Dave”) was appointed consultant diabetologist and endocrinologist to NHS Lanarkshire in 1987, being full time at Monklands Hospital since 1998. He helped to found and was secretary of the Lanarkshire Diabetes Group, developed the Lanarkshire Diabetes IT System, and was chairman of the Lanarkshire Area Drugs and Therapeutics Committee since 2003. He also served on national committees and was active in the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh. His hopelessly inappropriate sense of humour endeared him to all, and he became a true friend of many of his trainees. He leaves a wife, Allyson, and three children.

Andrew D B Harrower

W T Andrew Todd

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