

OBITUARIES

Malcolm Eliot MacGregor

David Snashall

Consultant paediatrician (b 1916; q St Thomas' Hospital Medical School 1939; MD Lond, FRCP Lond; DCH), died from a cerebral haemorrhage on 21 December 2013.

A leading figure in child health, Malcolm Eliot MacGregor was born in London to Malcolm E MacGregor (a notable medical entomologist, head of the Wellcome Entomological Field Laboratories at Esher, Surrey) and Marguerite Muncey, a practising doctor, of Washington, USA. They met in America while his father was on a pellagra commission.

He spent his childhood in Surrey and attended Milbourne Lodge preparatory school in Esher. He later attended Westminster School and St Thomas' Hospital Medical School.

Both parents died aged 44, his father from Addison's disease in 1933 and his mother from cancer in 1940. This left Malcolm and his brother, Gerry, in total poverty, but a Lord Kitchener medical services memorial scholarship paid for their medical education. Malcolm's brother became a consultant physician in Guildford, before being rendered severely disabled as a result of a road traffic accident. The scholarship obliged the recipients, in return for a medical education, to spend five years in the navy after qualification.

Malcolm qualified with honours and worked initially at St Thomas' as casualty officer and house physician to Harold Gardiner-Hill before joining the navy in the September of that year. He was at Haslar Hospital, Portsmouth, and deployed on the destroyer HMS *Havant* (destined originally for the Brazilian Navy), which was the subject of a serious air attack at Dunkirk that killed and wounded many of the ship's company, and which was subsequently sunk by a British destroyer, in order to prevent any of its equipment falling into enemy hands.

Malcolm was carrying his camera, illicitly, during the raid and took many colour photographs of the action. The camera was later left in a London taxi, and he never saw it again. If the film was ever developed it would have provided whoever kept the camera with a vivid and unique record of great historical and no doubt monetary value. Malcolm served in the Fleet Air Arm, Lee on Solent, on HMS *Albatross* and spent 18 months in Freetown, Sierra Leone. Then he moved to the East Africa Naval Air Station at Tanga, Tanganyika, where he met Marigold (a naval volunteer for abroad) in 1944. They married later that year in Madras, India.

Malcolm was demobilised in 1946 and came back to St Thomas' as an ex-service registrar in medicine and then went to St George's Hospital paediatric department, which was at that time situated in Tite Street, Chelsea—a small children's hospital that closed in the mid 1960s. During that period he lived in one of the flats overlooking the Royal Albert Hall. He obtained his MD in 1946, was first assistant in the paediatric department of

St Mary's Hospital in 1947, and was appointed consultant paediatrician to Warwickshire County Council in May 1948.

At the inception of the NHS in 1948 Malcolm was appointed consultant paediatrician to South Warwickshire Hospitals, which were then associated with the Birmingham Children's Hospital; he worked there until his retirement in 1976. He was to live another 37 years and would have been disappointed had he known he wouldn't live to be 100.

During this time he was a member of the British Paediatric Association and the Paediatric Visiting Club of Great Britain, which comprised the leading university paediatricians of the day. He recorded the minutes of those meetings for over 20 years in his droll literary style; the accounts are hilarious. He became president of the paediatric section of the Royal Society of Medicine in 1967. During 1956-57 he was seconded to the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, to help in the development of the paediatric department of a new university hospital. He also spent time working in New Zealand in 1971 for four months and in Mauritius for three months in 1981.

Malcolm could have been a leading academic—he had 35 or so papers published on a wide variety of topics—including primary malaria in London children, the scientific background for infant feeding, renal calcification in children, tuberculous meningitis, infantile cortical hyperostosis, acute benign pericarditis, osteomyelitis variolosa—a rare complication of smallpox—pink disease and primary renal acidosis, epilepsy in children, paediatrics in west Africa, urinary infections and pyelonephritis in children, coeliac disease, juvenile diabetes, hyperparathyroidism, and Henoch-Schönlein purpura—but he chose not to: instead, he became a superb clinician and teacher, who combined the qualities and skills of a consultant paediatrician with those of a splendid family doctor.

Not all hospital doctors returning to Britain after the second world war could take up their previous positions in prestigious metropolitan hospitals. The new NHS needed high calibre men and women to serve the whole country, and Warwick Hospital—a former poorhouse—got two of the best: Stephen Whittaker, a consummate general physician and medical politician, and Malcolm MacGregor. They were the leaders who changed the backwater that was Warwick Hospital into a teaching hospital to rival the best. They attracted first rate consultant staff and a succession of medical students and junior doctors who departed Warwick Hospital conscious of what an extraordinary place it had been in which to work. Many of them made their mark later in institutions throughout the world. It used to be said there were four, not three, higher medical qualifications to be gained in Britain—those from London, Edinburgh, and Glasgow—plus the MRCP from Warwick. The hospital had a dreary aspect, but its location on the Grand Union

Canal and the beautiful countryside around made it an idyllic place to live and practise medicine, especially as consultants had to cover the other hospitals in the group: the Warneford Hospital in Leamington Spa, the Monroe Devis Maternity Hospital in Tiddington, and the General Hospital in Stratford upon Avon, in which the two halves (medical and surgical) were famously separated by a narrow lane leading to the livestock market. Patients in the medical half destined for surgical operations on a market day just had to wait while the sheep charged through. Not to be forgotten, the Ellen Badger Maternity Hospital in Shipston upon Stour, where visiting medical staff could make use of the hospital punt. Doctors in training also acted as chauffeurs, driving the MacGregor Saab to these country hospitals and to the Children's Hospital in Birmingham, where Malcolm also consulted. He is commemorated to this day by the Malcolm MacGregor Children's Unit at Warwick Hospital

He was married to Marigold for over 60 years—"not nearly long enough," in his words. They lived first in Wellesbourne, near Warwick, then bought Pittern Hill Farm, near Kineton. This was a beautiful, rambling old house with a dramatic view across to the escarpment of Edge Hill. Malcolm worked tirelessly on the superb, complicated garden. Marigold, a painter, set up her studio in the immense cattle barn, and there they brought up their three children—Nicola, Philip, and Marguerite ("Ku")—as well as a succession of dogs

In 1969, having put up with symptoms over many years, Malcolm realised he might have coeliac disease. Tests confirmed the diagnosis, and he started a gluten free diet, with immediate positive effects. He wrote about adult coeliac disease from a personal point of view in the *Lancet* that year.¹ He and Marigold were great travellers, always laden with supplies of gluten free food. Oddly, in his 90s, the gluten sensitivity vanished, and he started to enjoy proper pasta, bread, and cakes. He did, however, remain tall, thin, and fit enough to walk the fields with his dogs until he died.

In 2002 he and Marigold returned home one evening to find their barn, a huge and highly original structure of considerable

architectural importance, mysteriously ablaze. This was a disaster and a blow so great they decided to leave Pittern Hill Farm in order to live in an easier to manage property more suited to their advancing years. They bought the oldest, quirkiest house in Badby, Northamptonshire, which again had extensive gardens and marvellous views but was far from being a suitable home for an elderly couple. They loved it. Malcolm continued his gardening and took up gros point, covering every available flat surface with tapestry. Marigold continued to paint and became modestly successful. They were always welcoming, full of questions, gracious, cultured, and, above all, good fun. Marigold was a redoubtable raconteur; Malcolm, more reserved, was witty and erudite and maintained his intellectual verve until the end. He read widely, was always off to films and art galleries, and he loved music, preferring Bartok to Mahler. Despite his long retirement and advancing years, he remained an acute observer of the medical scene and a shrewd diagnostician. Aged over 80, and justly pleased with the modest prize he received, he turned out to be the only doctor in Britain who correctly identified the cause of cough and tachypnoea in a toddler—a case put forward as a diagnostic challenge by the *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*.²

Everyone who came in contact with Malcolm—sick children, parents of sick children, friends, and family—remembers him with huge affection. His colleagues admired his clinical acumen, his courtesy, his sense of humour and his friendship. He was the perfect role model for young doctors in training, and those who were fortunate enough to be taught by him had some of the best times of their clinical lives.

Predeceased by Marigold in 2010 he leaves three children and eight grandchildren.

1 MacGregor ME. Adult coeliac disease. *Lancet* 1969;293:725-6.

2 Muthusamy S, Pandya HC, Luyt D. Cough and tachypnoea in a toddler. *J R Soc Med* 2003;96:81-2.

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