

## Victor Almon McKusick

Father of medical genetics

Victor McKusick was acknowledged throughout the world as a visionary medical researcher. He won prestigious medical science awards and membership to the US National Academy of Sciences. But, despite all the acclaim, he remained for more than half a century until the end of his life a teacher at heart.

“We all agree throughout the world that Victor McKusick was the leading figure in genetics in medicine,” says Giovanni Romeo, president of the European Genetics Foundation, who as a young postdoctoral student at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine in Baltimore, Maryland, met McKusick 40 years ago. “But the main mission in his life was to teach.” He was very tolerant and supportive, giving students freedom to “do their own thing.” And, unlike many European professors, he was informal and easygoing. “He was very American in this regard.”

One could say that teaching was in McKusick’s genes. His father had been a high school principal before turning to dairy farming, his mother an elementary school teacher before marrying. McKusick and his twin brother were born in 1921, two of five children. He later described his family as churchgoing, very religious, and very intellectual.

As a young teenager, McKusick had intended to enter the ministry, but at 15 he developed a severe streptococcal infection, which put him in a Maine hospital for a week followed by 10 weeks in a Boston hospital. This gave him his first chance to observe doctors closely. He later explained: “I decided I liked what doctors did. I decided I wanted to join them.”

Before completing his bachelor’s degree at Tufts University, McKusick entered Johns Hopkins Medical School in 1943, which had waived the requirement of a bachelor’s degree owing to a student shortage during the second world war; here he completed his internship and residency in internal medicine.

He headed the cardiovascular unit at Baltimore Marine Hospital from 1948 to 1950 while moving up in the department



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of medicine at Johns Hopkins. He detoured in the 1950s after becoming interested in Marfan’s syndrome, an inherited disorder marked by heart defects and unusually tall stature. His fascination with the disorder started with one tall patient.

He began meticulously recording inheritance patterns and clinical features of the syndrome, branching out to research other inherited diseases. In 1957 he founded the Johns Hopkins Division of Medical Genetics, which he headed until 1973, when he became chairman of the department of medicine and physician in chief of the Johns Hopkins Hospital.

Earlier this year, McKusick reminisced on his switch to genetics: “Some of my colleagues thought I was committing professional suicide because I had a reputation in cardiology and was shifting over to focus for the most part on rare, unimportant conditions.”

From the late 1950s McKusick attracted students—and patients—from around the world, sowing intellectual seeds in multiple generations. One student was David Rimoin, now director of the Medical Genetics Institute at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles, who in 1964 entered McKusick’s then new human genetics PhD programme at Johns Hopkins. Others trained by him included eminent British scientists such as David Weatherall, Malcom Ferguson-Smith, Alan Emery, and Peter Harper.

McKusick co-founded the short course in medical and experimental mammalian genetics in 1960, held each summer since in conjunction with the Jackson Laboratory in Bar Harbor, Maine. In the late 1980s Dr Romeo enlisted the support of McKusick to co-found

the European School of Genetic Medicine, similar to the Bar Harbor concept.

McKusick realised early that inbred communities would be ideal for searching for genes causing recessive diseases. He gained access to Old Order Amish communities in Pennsylvania, charting medical histories. He also studied members of Little People of America, a support group for people with dwarfism, which made the 6 foot 2 inch McKusick an honorary member.

McKusick studied rare diseases to prove basic biological principles, but Dr Rimoin says he once accompanied his mentor to the “freak show” at the Barnum and Bailey circus at Madison Square Garden in New York City to find new research subjects. As a result, they identified unusual types of dwarfism and genetic diseases that they were able to study in the clinic in similar patients for years to come.

In 1966 McKusick published the first edition of the now classic *Mendelian Inheritance in Man*, listing 1500 inherited disease genes. The last printed edition appeared in 1998 with 12 000 genes. The current online reference has nearly 19 000 entries. In 1969 McKusick was among the first to propose the human genome map, whose sequence was published in 2001.

Last year, McKusick received an honorary degree in biotechnology at the University of Bologna, declaring that his fondest dream, now fulfilled, was that all the genes would be mapped to their specific chromosomal locations. Dr Romeo says, “He was always anticipating what was going to happen. He knew a long time ago that genetics was going to be important to all medical specialties.”

Among his many awards were the 1997 Albert Lasker award for special achievement in medical science, the 2001 National Medal of Science, and the 2008 Japan prize in medical genomics and genetics.

He leaves a wife, Anne, and three children, as well as his twin brother, Vincent.

### Ned Stafford

Dr Victor Almon McKusick, university professor of medical genetics, Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, Baltimore, Maryland, USA (b 1921; q Johns Hopkins Medical School), died from complications due to cancer on 22 July 2008.

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**OBITUARIES** continue on p 467

**Desmond Sackville Gwyn Bath**



Former general practitioner High Wycombe (b 1935; q Edinburgh 1959; DLO, DObstRCOG), died from metastatic bowel cancer on 11 March 2008.

After house jobs in Edinburgh, Desmond Sackville Gwyn Bath served in the Royal Air Force for nine years, initially at Akroteri, Cyprus, and later at Halton, Buckinghamshire, where he gained a diploma in laryngology and otology. After national service he accepted an invitation to practise in High Wycombe, where he served the local community for 26 years. He retired in 1996 to Edinburgh and travelled south regularly to work for the British Furniture Manufacturers' Association screening programme for nasal cancer. Predeceased by a daughter, he leaves a wife, Eleanor, three children, and two grandchildren.

**Louise Bath, Eleanor Bath**  
Cite this as: *BMJ* 2008;337:a1309

**Sylvia Dische (née Goldberg)**



Former medical officer, school health services, London Boroughs of Southwark and Camberwell (b 1924; q University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 1946; BSc, MRCP), died on 7 July 2008 after a stroke. Sylvia Dische (née Goldberg) came to Britain from South Africa

in 1950 to train in paediatrics. After studies in Edinburgh, she held junior posts at the Canadian Red Cross Memorial Hospital, Taplow, and in London. After marrying in 1953, she worked part-time in schools and clinics in south London, while also bringing up a family. She became a recognised authority on treating nocturnal enuresis, particularly the use of enuresis alarms, and was in demand as a teacher, writer, and occasional broadcaster. She also lectured in Norway. She retired in 1989. She leaves a husband, Fred; two children; and a grandson.

**Frederick Dische**  
Cite this as: *BMJ* 2008;337:a1312

**Rodney Kevan Hassard Parker**



Former general practitioner Bushey, Hertfordshire (b 1934; q Bristol 1959; DRCOG MRCP), died from acute leukaemia on 17 June 2008.

Rodney Kevan Hassard Parker settled in Bushey in 1962, where he was the archetype of the family doctor, building up a practice of seven partners and being instrumental in creating the Watford GP training scheme, one of the first in the UK. Warmth and nous infused his consultations, and he made swift, penetrating, often witty, judgments about patients and colleagues while presenting himself as a kind of absent minded professor. A pioneer of multidisciplinary working, he was the driving force at Bushey and District Hospital, where he also operated, until its closure. He leaves a wife, Jennifer; two children; and a granddaughter.

**Tom Boyd**  
Cite this as: *BMJ* 2008;337:a1218

**David Glynne Price**



Former consultant anaesthetist Royal Berkshire and Battle Hospitals NHS Trust (b 1925; q St Thomas's Hospital, London, 1948; DObstRCOG, DA, FRCA), d 10 July 2008.

David Glynne Price pioneered intensive care in Reading from his appointment in 1968, and for two decades he was a constant presence in the three intensive care units he established there. He produced and regularly updated a training manual, fondly known as the "Blue Bible," which was cherished by generations of trainees, many of them future directors of intensive care units throughout Britain and beyond. David was a kind, cultured, passionate man, providing friendship and hospitality to his "family" of hospital staff of all levels. He leaves a wife, Audrey; three children; and five grandchildren.

**Edward Young**  
Cite this as: *BMJ* 2008;337:a1311

**Charles Michael Schmulian**



Consultant anaesthetist and intensivist Ealing Hospital, Middlesex (b 1951; q University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa, 1976; BSc, FFARCSI), died from cholangiocarcinoma on 24 November 2007.

Charles Michael Schmulian trained in anaesthesia in South Africa and at the Hammersmith and Royal London Hospitals before joining

the consultant staff at Ealing Hospital. Highly respected with wide clinical experience, and an enthusiastic teacher, he had a huge impact on intensive care as clinical director of the intensive therapy unit. He also provided anaesthesia care to the clergy at St Luke's Hospital, and chaired Ravenscourt Ethics Committee, an independent ethics forum for non-NHS research. Charles was diagnosed as having a rare cancer during a sabbatical visit to Australia, and was overcome by a recurrence. He retained his dignity, kindness, and cheerfulness throughout.

**Richard Lashley**  
Cite this as: *BMJ* 2008;337:a1221

**Roger Henry Secker-Walker**



Former director Office of Health Promotion Research, College of Medicine, University of Vermont (b 1935; q Cambridge/University College Hospital, London, 1959; FRCP), died from prostate cancer on 8 June 2008.

In 1963, as lecturer in University College Hospital Medical School, Roger Henry Secker-Walker pioneered radioisotope scanning of the lungs and kidney, which eventually led to his becoming the first head of the Pulmonary Division at St Louis University in Missouri. In 1981 he became director of Vermont Lung Center at the University of Vermont in Burlington, and in 1983 director of the Office of Health Promotion Research, a multidisciplinary team that did groundbreaking work in smoking prevention and cessation. He showed that targeted anti-smoking propaganda reduces smoking rates among those targeted. He leaves a wife, Jocelyn; two children; and a granddaughter.

**Jonathan Secker-Walker**  
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