



Edward Joseph Lister Lowbury

Expert on hospital infection and distinguished poet

In a prolific and distinguished career Edward Lowbury pioneered the study of hospital infection, was a founder and first president of the Hospital Infection Society, and was a fellow of three medical royal colleges (pathologists, physicians, and surgeons) and of the Royal Society for Literature. He was, said his colleague and successor, Graham Ayliffe, a leader in dealing with burns infection, the problems of antibiotic resistance, and skin disinfection. He was awarded the OBE for his medical work when he retired in 1979.

His career and future specialty may have been determined when his general practitioner father and musical mother—she was a member of the Hallé family—gave him the middle names of Joseph Lister. He was educated at St Paul's School in London, University College, Oxford, and Guy's Medical School, taking a BSc in physiology on the way and qualifying in 1939. He did his house jobs at The London Hospital, and in 1941 moved to the Emergency Public Health Laboratory Service for two years. He then spent three years as a pathologist in the Royal Army Medical Corps, mainly in Kenya, where he took an interest in folk medicine and witchdoctoring.

After three years at the Common Cold

research Unit in Salisbury, he became, in 1949, head of bacteriology at the Medical Research Council Burns Unit, situated in Birmingham Accident Hospital. He stayed there for the rest of his career. Among his major achievements was a controlled clinical trial confirming the finding of his predecessor Leonard Coleman that closed ventilated burns dressing rooms reduced airborne infection. He showed that topical antibacterials helped to prevent infection.

He was interested in the mechanism and prevention of antibiotic resistance and kept a record of its occurrence in burn and wound infections throughout his 30 years at the burns unit. He reported the emergence of a new plasmid in *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* that made it resistant to carbenicillin and other antibiotics.

With Harold Lilly he developed laboratory tests for measuring surgical and hygienic hand disinfection and did controlled trials on their efficacy. With Owen Lidwell and others he authored a huge MRC controlled trial of clean-air systems in preventing infection in joint replacement surgery.

He founded Birmingham's Hospital Infection Research Laboratory and was its first honorary director. With Graham Ayliffe, its first director, his work included the epidemiology of infection in the region's hospitals, the spread of Gram negative organisms, and testing disinfectants and sterilisers. He chaired an MRC subcommittee that published the evidence based *Aseptic Methods in the Operating Suite* (1968).

He worked well into his retirement, lecturing around the world and publishing 150

papers and two medical books, *Drug Resistance in Antimicrobial Therapy* (1974) and *Control of Hospital Infection* (1975, revised 1998).

Edward Lowbury had a parallel career as a poet. He fell in love with poetry when he was 10 and won the Newdigate prize for poetry as an undergraduate at Oxford. He published many volumes of poetry, and edited *Apollo*, the anthology of doctor-poets published for the BMA's 150th anniversary. He always carried a notebook in which he wrote medical ideas at one end and ideas for poems at the other, which met in the middle to, he said, mutual enlightenment. At other times, records Roland John, he took a mischievous pleasure in keeping medicine and poetry separate: "Wearing a plain trilby to the lab and a pork-pie hat with a wavy brim when I went out with my artist and poet friends."

He published the first of his 14 poetry books in 1936, while still an undergraduate. His collected poems were published in 1993, at the same time as a Festschrift to mark his 80th birthday. Birmingham celebrated its centenary in 1985 with an anthology of Lowbury's poems, entitled *Birmingham! Birmingham!*

With his wife, Alison Young, he published a biography of the 16th century poet, composer, and physician Thomas Campion, and a biography of his father in law, the poet Andrew Young. Alison was a professional pianist, and together they helped found the Birmingham Chamber Music Society.

Stephen Lock, a former editor of the *BMJ*, said that Lowbury was a quiet, soft-spoken man. He was, said his friend Eileen Totten, "quite short and slim, and yet the most well-rounded man I knew." He was modest about his attainments. In addition to his professional and cultural interests, he had an enduring love of steam engines and could imitate the noises they made.

He became blind from glaucoma and went into a nursing home when his wife died in 2001. He is survived by their three daughters.

Caroline Richmond

Edward Joseph Lister Lowbury, bacteriologist and poet; head of bacteriology, MRC Burns Research Unit; cofounder and first chairman, Society for Hospital Infection (b 6 December 1913; q Oxford/Guy's Hospital, London, 1939; OBE, MA, DM, FRCP, FRCS), d 10 July 2007.