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Peter George Higgins

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Peter George Higgins was born in Kettering on 11 July 1926 to a non-medical family. His grandfather was a vicar, and his father was a sales manager in the shoe trade. He had one elder brother who suffered severe brain trauma at birth, resulting in lifelong epileptic seizures and social constraints. Peter could remember, as a very young child, the hard work of pushing his brother in a pram across fields to a distant farm to obtain unpasteurised milk for what was then considered the latest “treatment” for his brother’s condition. The family moved to Stopsley, Bedfordshire, where Peter attended first junior school, then Luton Grammar School and where he met his future wife, Marjorie Simpson, who was a pupil at the parallel Luton Girls’ High School and a

member of Luton Girls’ Choir. Whether inspired by his early view of illness through his brother’s trauma, or from the associated need to strike out independently from a difficult home environment, he moved to London to study medicine at Westminster Medical School, qualifying in 1950.

Peter set out initially on a career in paediatrics, completing house physician roles at Westminster Hospital’s children’s department and subsequently at Addenbrooke’s in Cambridge. In 1952 he joined the Royal Air Force, rising to acting Sq/Ldr and senior medical officer, No 1 Flying Training School, by 1954. After national service he changed career direction and joined the department of haematology at

Manchester Royal Infirmary. He moved to undertake a role as demonstrator in pathology at Barts in 1955, then embarked on the start of his main career as a trainee bacteriologist at the Central Public Health Laboratory in Colindale (now part of Public Health England). As part of this training, he completed a diploma in bacteriology at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM), and it was there that he met many professional colleagues who, with their families, became lifetime friends right across the world.

In 1958 he formally joined the virus reference laboratory at Colindale and subsequently became a research associate at the department of bacteriology at University College Hospital Medical School, London.

During his time as a senior, then consultant, virologist (1961-71) he established a new outreach Public Health Laboratory Service (PHLS) virology laboratory in Cirencester in the Cotswolds. He shared a two storey Cotswold stone terraced property in the town centre with Edgar Hope-Simpson, a local GP and self trained epidemiologist, supporting research of local and national importance—including into seasonal flu and chicken pox. HS, as Edgar was known locally, believed that a virus could lie dormant in the body for years and then reappear in another form. This theory in relation to chicken pox was presented in the Albert Wander lecture in 1964, with varicella zoster virus later being identified as the single virus responsible and Peter supported the continuing research. Many years later the practice was recognised as a model when in 1994 the Royal College of GPs introduced research general practices, in no small part enabled in its early foundation by the PHLS laboratory which had been established in the same building. His family remember these years more for the accidental hatching of eggs used for viral membrane inoculation, which resulted in a brood of chickens being brought up, first in the airing cupboard in Peter's daughter's bedroom, and then following him round for many weeks as the relevant "imprinted" adult.

For the 10 years from 1971 to 1981 Peter worked sequentially at the virus reference laboratory at Colindale, as consultant virologist and clinical lecturer in virology at the Bristol Royal Infirmary and Public Health Laboratory, and, finally, as microbiologist (virologist) for the Pan American Health Organization and the World Health Organization at the Caribbean Epidemiological Centre in Trinidad.

His last substantive post was as the deputy director of the common cold unit in Salisbury, which investigated viruses that caused common colds, and he worked with David Tyrrell on the first known coronaviruses. Along with researchers from University College London, he also investigated and published on the role of human parvovirus B19 during 1985-87, discovering the virus as the causative agent of erythematous rash illness and of its specific interactions in people with chronic haemolytic anaemia.

He rarely spoke about his research endeavours, allowing others to take the limelight of what were often seminal pieces of inquiry of lasting clinical impact. During the later years of his career, his professional skills were recognised when he was invited on a WHO fellowship to the USA and Canada in 1970, on a state visit to Romania in 1975, and on a WHO consultancy to Sri Lanka in 1978-9. He published widely on respiratory and enterovirus infections, virus infections of the skin, and viral conjunctivitis, and he explored the potential use of intranasal interferon against common colds.

Only 48 hours before his death he was conversing with complete composure and recall on his early pioneering work with electron microscopy, and on the newly reported Wuhan coronavirus at the start of what has since become the current covid-19 pandemic.

He was a quiet and private man, enjoying gardening, antiques, and worldwide travel with his wife, Marjorie, in retirement. Despite this he made every effort to maintain international links with those with whom he had trained or worked, often with the relevant families subsequently keeping in touch when the professional parental generation passed away. Suffolk and the Cotswolds remained his favourite lifelong haunts in England and, predeceased by Marjorie in 2014, he continued to live out his final years at the home they built together near Cirencester.

He fortuitously had a very early lung cancer diagnosed in 2016 during a separate investigation for recurrent pyrexia after pacemaker insertion. After a single course of stereotactic radiotherapy, the diagnosis hardly affected his life at all until a short and rapid decline with old age in January 2020. He leaves two children (one a public health doctor in London), four grandchildren (one a junior doctor in Essex), and a niece.

Consultant virologist and deputy director of the common cold research unit, Salisbury (b 1926; q Westminster Medical School, London, 1950; MD, Dip Bact, FRCPath), died from old age with lung cancer on 11 January 2020