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John Hawk: global ambassador for photodermatology

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John Hawk, a charismatic New Zealander, spoke with great affection about his mentor, Ian Magnus, who "spawned in the UK the whole new concept of clinical photobiology." Magnus developed the skin irradiation monochromator. He was also the first, in 1960, to describe in the *Lancet* one of the major photobiological disorders, erythropoietic protoporphyria.

But Magnus, a notable eccentric, was undemonstrative and withdrawn. Hawk recalled him striding the corridor eyes down, whistling a classical tune, carrying a string bag in lieu of a briefcase. He was constantly at loggerheads with his professorial colleagues.

Such was his overwhelming shyness that Hawk, his trusted lieutenant, acted as a go-between between him and the staff, which was, said Hawk, "something of a diplomatic challenge." Magnus also insisted that Hawk stood in for him in radio or TV interviews and even some lectures.

Hawk could not have had a better apprenticeship for the role he was to assume as a global ambassador for photodermatology. He and Magnus, his "best boss," were polar opposites, but got on extremely well. Many

doctors shy away from the camera and the big stage. Hawk, later professor of dermatological photobiology at the St John's Institute of Dermatology, London, had no such inhibitions

A great communicator, he loved the limelight—especially highlighting the way a very small subspecialty had been transformed into something significantly bigger. A proud moment for Hawk was when his unit became a department.

Innovator

Describing Hawk as a "giant," Henry Lim, former president of the American Academy of Dermatology, recalled his "unrelenting focus" in pursuit of evidence based data to advance photodermatology.

But Hawk was far more than an ambassador; he had a sharply honed gift for spotting and recruiting scientific talent into what was a very happy department. For example, he furthered understanding of the pathogenesis and clinical management of the idiopathic photodermatoses, confirming their immune basis, including the most prevalent, polymorphic light eruption.

He introduced the unifying concept of chronic actinic dermatitis and described the characteristics of patients with actinic prurigo seen in the UK, including the human leucocyte antigen association.

He also progressed phototherapy, including demonstrating the superior benefits of narrowband ultraviolet B for the treatment of vitiligo and other skin diseases, in contrast to psoralens ultraviolet A.

He was also passionately committed to research into and campaigning against the effects of sunlight and sunbeds on the skin. When he and his younger brother, Richard, were young boys in the 1940s and 1950s, sun protection was of only moderate concern. Their mother even advocated a mild degree of early sunburning to promote a good tan, and John and Richard ran "browning competitions" to see who could get the best tan.

Like so many New Zealanders, Richard later developed multiple but non-aggressive skin cancers. John hypothesised that he would also have been susceptible if he had not moved to the UK.

Early life and career

The son of a civil engineer managing the local railway system, young John excelled both academically and sportingly—in his final school year in Hamilton he won a national scholarship as a top scholar in languages in New Zealand and was the subject of a feature in the *New Zealand Herald*. His love of French and German was an important factor in his decision to go to Europe. Latin and English also highlighted his flair for languages.

His family say that he became obsessed with the idea of ensuring that French people would think he was French by developing the perfect accent. He was an avid listener to French radio and had recently taken out a subscription to the French comic *Piscou*.

The power of language and communication was the basis of his answer to the question of what inspired him. "Overall, logic, a lack of corruption, a determination to reach a useful or essential end against all odds, and the ability to communicate this emphatically, rhetorically, and with some humour," he said.

Hawk spectacularly bridged what the British novelist C P Snow called "the great cultural divide" separating the two great areas of intellectual activity: science and the arts. He was expected to go into the New Zealand diplomatic service to make use of his languages, but studied physics in Auckland before reading medicine in Dunedin.

In 1970 he met his future wife, Lorna Mitchell, a Scottish paediatrician and later a paediatric immunologist, in disagreeable circumstances while working as a houseman at the Green Lane Hospital in Auckland. Newly arrived, she was given Hawk's room in the doctor's quarters—the best room—and his right as senior houseman. But all thoughts of remonstration disappeared when they met. A year later they left for Europe.

Hawk obtained a job in the emergency department at St Mary's Hospital, London, thanks to an invaluable contact, J P R Williams, the legendary Welsh rugby player. (Hawk had a celebrity contact book many journalists would have been proud of. Asked which famous people he had met for his *Memoirs of a Lifetime*, he listed more than 150, including King Charles, Prince William, Princess Anne, and scores of sportsmen—mainly cricketers, golfers, and rugby players.)

After another post at St Mary's, as senior registrar in cardiology, he obtained what he called "a more definitive" and "prestigious" post as the neurological senior house officer, following an interview with a panel including Roger Bannister of four minute mile fame.

The job, unexpectedly, included a little bit of dermatology. His career assumed shape when his dermatology bosses offered him, "without interview," a fast track to consultancy as a vacancy occurred. They did not keep their promise, but within three years, in 1979, after further training at Guy's, Hawk joined the world renowned St John's Institute of Dermatology in London, thanks in part to his physics degree. He became a consultant after completing training at Harvard.

He went on to become an outstanding head of department, according to Hélène du P Menagé, formerly his research registrar, now a consultant dermatologist at Lewisham Hospital and honorary consultant at St John's.

She said: "I loved working with John. It was fun. It was a very exciting time to be in photobiology. He was extremely personable to everyone. The patients adored him. One thank you letter was addressed to 'the charming and very good looking Dr Hawk.'"

Scientist-clinician relationships are notoriously competitive and frosty, but Antony Young, emeritus professor of experimental photobiology at St John's, said, "John was very good. He let me get on with it. Clinicians often take the credit for scientists' work. This was never the case with John."

The founder of the British Photodermatology Group and co-founder of the American Photomedicine Society, Hawk was also a prolific author and editor. His books included *Photodermatology* (1998), the first British textbook covering all aspects of ultraviolet and visible light effects on the skin, from the basic science underlying the changes. His highly acclaimed teaching courses at St John's sired a new generation who are now running their own photobiology departments all over the world. He also took great pride in organising international meetings.

A dedicated family man, he leaves his wife, Lorna; their two sons, Tim, who is in banking, and Simon, who is in marketing; and five grandchildren.

John Lyndon McLeod Hawk (b 1942; q Dunedin, New Zealand, 1969; MD, FRCP, FRACP), died from pulmonary fibrosis on 25 December 2022