Charles George McEwen: visionary ophthalmologist

John Illman

London, UK

Operating microscopes have become as standard in ophthalmology as antibiotics in treating infection. But magnification in ophthalmology has a controversial history. In the 1950s and ’60s, many clinicians struggling with lengthy lists complained about how long it took to use the new cumbersome devices. Not knowing what they could not see, they swore by their old-fashioned loupes or magnifiers.

Charles McEwen (“Charlie”) played a prominent part in the revolution that consigned the loupe to the museum and brought the operating microscope into the clinical mainstream. He was also part of a new generation driven by the dream of making the world a better place after the second world war and by the triumph of the NHS ideal—that people should be treated according to medical need rather than the ability to pay.

**Bold and courageous**

Embracing leading edge surgery for a wide spectrum of conditions, particularly for cataracts and diseases of the cornea, McEwen was described by a colleague as “a bold and courageous surgeon, but without the big ego that usually accompanies such a trait.”

A precocious talent, he became one of the youngest consultants in the country in his 20s.

The first in his family to go to university, he started at Glasgow University in 1948, the first year of the NHS. After completing house jobs at Stobhill General Hospital and the Victoria Infirmary, he joined the Lancashire Fusiliers for his national service and became a captain with the Royal Army Medical Corps, with which he retained links for the rest of his life.

His tireless energy, intellect, and skill made him popular with colleagues, trainees, and patients alike. Noted for his welcoming nature and enthusiasm for work, he inspired nurses and orthoptists, as well as successive generations of medical students and young doctors. Tributes from former colleagues talk about his being supportive, exceptional, indefatigable, dynamic and respected, with a love of people.

His daughter, Carrie, consultant ophthalmologist at Ninewells Hospital, Dundee, and a former president of the Royal College of Ophthalmologists, said, “One of his previous registrars summed him up as feeling ‘educated, supported, and encouraged’ when being trained by him—something we all aspire to.”

**Early life**

Born and brought up in Denniston, McEwen was dux (top pupil) in 1948 at Whitehill School, where he excelled in athletics and rugby. A member of local swimming and water polo teams, he was also a sergeant in the Boy’s Brigade.

McEwen was deacon of the Incorporation of Barbers of Glasgow in 1970, deacon of the Incorporation of Tailors of Rutherglen, and president of Rutherglen Rotary Club.

A life member of Royal Troon Golf Club and past captain of Cambuskenneth and the Glasgow Medical golf clubs, he also played golf on his beloved Isle of Arran at Whiting Bay, where the
family have a holiday home and enjoy walking and boating. A devoted family man, McEwen ran clinics on the island to save the locals trips to the mainland. McEwen died suddenly, but peacefully. He leaves his wife, Jan; a daughter; three sons; and eight grandchildren.

Biography

Charles George McEwen (b 1931; q Glasgow, 1953), died after developing pneumonia following a short period of physical decline on 1 February 2020.