David Nicholas Challacombe

Former consultant paediatrician Taunton and Somerset Hospital (b 1936; q King’s College, London, 1960; MD, FRCP, FRCPCH), d 9 July 2006.

David Challacombe, who died aged 70 on 9 July, was a consultant paediatrician based in Taunton, Somerset, who consistently sustained high quality research from a district general hospital. He was a well respected hospital consultant whose passion for medicine was driven from early childhood when his younger sister, Ann, died of gastroenteritis in India at the age of 3. His academic work undertaken by the Somerset Children’s Research Unit, which he established at the hospital in 1975, was the highlight of his career. The centre was opened by Dr Magnus Pyke and was founded to investigate nutritional and gastroenterological diseases in childhood.

The work undertaken included considerable medical research published in national and international medical journals and during its 23 years the unit became widely regarded as an important centre for the study of nutritional diseases in childhood. It was here that early research into coeliac disease, the gluten intolerance condition, was undertaken, and initial research showed that the introduction of gluten-containing food to babies should wait until they were 4 months old. He was also the first to record the steep decline in the number of young children with coeliac disease in the South West region, largely due to his work.

In the early 1970s, during other coeliac research, David made a phenomenal hypothesis that there was a relation between chemicals in the brain and a person’s mood a decade before it was actually proved. Other breakthrough research was undertaken into food allergy, including allergies to cows’ milk, eggs, wheat, colourings, preservatives, and additives. In 1994, David’s research into bovine somatotrophin (BST), the milk-stimulating hormone injected into cows in the United States, showed that it was potentially cancerous to humans, as published in the *Lancet*. This work led to his involvement in the Food Ethics Council and to his participation in a committee which met at the House of Commons in December 1996 and resulted in the banning of this hormone in the United Kingdom and later in Canada. His colleague at the Food Ethics Council, Professor John Verrall, said of David’s involvement, "I greatly admire his courage in confronting government with his research evidence that showed how they, with powerful companies, risked compromising public health. It was a brave thing to do and others, in a similar situation might well have chosen not to."
David’s work in Taunton was particularly unusual as it was undertaken in a district general hospital as opposed to a research institute, but he managed to sustain an exceptionally high standard of clinical research against all the odds. His findings were regularly published in the *Lancet*, the *British Medical Journal*, and others, arousing great interest nationally as the work was funded mainly through local philanthropy as well as grants from pharmaceutical companies. In 1986 the *Lancet* wrote: "The first ten years and first 45 publications illustrate the success of the venture. It seems a pity that the enterprise and imagination of Dr D N Challacombe and his colleagues now has to depend entirely on the goodwill of the Avalon Ladies’ Skittles League, cider drinkers at the Windwhistle Inn, Cricket St Thomas, and the like, with no support from the National Health Service."

As a result of his success he was asked by the Taunton and Somerset Trust to launch nationally the concept of a research team in a district general hospital, but it still remains an unusual achievement today and no one has replicated the high quality of research undertaken. He was honoured in 1995 to be invited by the Royal College of Physicians to give a regional lecture, one of the few consultant paediatricians to have been asked.

In 1974 David was able to combine his work with his love of cricket when he was invited to become honorary doctor for the Somerset County Cricket Club. He was a hugely popular and respected member of the club during his 12 years in the role at a time when the club was in its heyday. In 1980 he introduced Ian Botham to the work he was doing at the hospital and initiated the fundraising activities of the cricket star for leukaemia research, which still continues today. He regularly played cricket himself for the Somerset Stragglers, Taunton Deane, and the Flying Geese and was a proud member of the MCC (Marylebone Cricket Club). His love of the sport was spawned during his young life in India, on the beaches of Barbados, and at school in England. He remembered with great pride the few times he was asked to play with the first 11 in benefit matches alongside Ian Botham, Viv Richards, and Joel Garner.

David’s other great interest was 18th century English porcelain which he became fascinated by as a student in London. He was involved in running a stall at Portobello Road antiques market and enjoyed lecturing on the subject.

David was educated at the Cathedral School in Bombay, Truro School, and Harrison College in Barbados. He studied medicine at Kings College, London, and gained his paediatric experience at Great Ormond Street, the Institute of Child Health in Birmingham, and the Bristol Royal Hospital for Sick Children, among others, before taking up his consultant post in Taunton.

Despite his professional achievements and position, David’s genuine, boundless enthusiasm, kindness, and overwhelming sense of fair play made him a very popular figure. His ability to communicate with whomever he met and his warm sense of humour means he will be greatly missed by his friends and all those who knew him. Many people will not know how much he has achieved as he was enormously modest about his accolades.
David was married to Jan in 1965, and they had two children, Andrew and Emma, and they have four grandchildren. [Emma Wheeler]