

James Spence Medallist, 1985

Neil Simson Gordon

The James Spence Medal was presented to Dr Neil Gordon on 18 April 1985 by Sir Peter Tizard, President of the British Paediatric Association, who gave the following citation:

Neil Gordon, the son of a distinguished physician and the younger brother of a distinguished paediatric radiologist was, like his father, educated at Charterhouse School and Edinburgh University. His interest in paediatrics dates from his student days when he found our Past President, Professor Charles McNeil, an inspiring teacher. Neil Gordon qualified in 1940 and after holding two house posts in Edinburgh, and, by the way, applying unsuccessfully for a house post at Great Ormond Street, joined the RAF Medical Service in 1941. He had an adventurous military career as medical officer to a mobile field hospital in North Africa, Italy, and France. On demobilization in 1946 he was appointed supernumerary registrar at the Royal Infirmary, Edinburgh and two years later went to Queen Square, steadily climbing the ladder of clinical clerk, house physician, assistant registrar, and registrar, broken only by a spell in San Francisco as visiting lecturer. Incidentally, I first met him in 1951 when he was house physician to Dr Macdonald Critchley and I was a mere clinical clerk.

From Queen Square Neil Gordon moved in 1955 to St Mary's Hospital as senior registrar in neurology to Dr Denis Brinton and here his latent enthusiasm for paediatrics was stimulated by Tom Stapleton who encouraged him to attend rounds on Lewis Carroll ward. In 1958 he was appointed consultant paediatric neurologist in Manchester. He held this post until his retirement 25 years later. As a paediatric neurologist he was preceded by W G Wyllie and Paul Sandifer at Great Ormond Street, but he was the first to hold an established post in paediatric neurology outside London.

What of his contributions to the subject? Like most neurologists and many paediatricians he is interested in rare disease. This interest is reflected in some of his many publications, which include papers on a number of eponymic diseases or symptom complexes. Moreover, he was and has remained a much sought after consultant in cases of rare disease in childhood, not only in the north west region but also other parts of Great Britain and abroad. In this



role he might be regarded as having provided a quaternary service since I know that he has not infrequently been consulted by other paediatric neurologists!

But much more important has been his role in the wider field of paediatric neurology—that which is concerned with chronic handicaps, cerebral palsy, epilepsy, disorders of language, learning difficulties, clumsiness, and emotional problems, the borderland between somatic and psychological medicine. He has written extensively on these topics, has analysed their inter-relationships and shown how, for example, clumsiness is associated with learning difficulties and poor esteem from teachers and school fellows and how the resultant emotional disturbance leads to increasing clumsiness and educational failure in a vicious cycle. He has analysed the respective roles and interactions of physiotherapists, speech therapists, occupational therapists, social workers and health visitors, teachers and, particularly, parents in helping the chronically handicapped child and has demonstrated the good results that are a consequence of informed attitudes and management. His preoccupation with

common disorders of the nervous system in children is reflected in the contents of his textbook of paediatric neurology published in 1976.

Because he has always regarded therapists as equals, rather than as the consultant's handmaidens, he has been both able to learn from them and also to influence their work. This has especially been the case with speech therapy, once largely orientated towards adults, and the paediatric influence on this has in large measure been attributable to Neil Gordon. He took part in the government enquiry into speech therapy services in the early 1970s being a member of the Quirke Committee. He is, by the way, an Honorary Fellow of the College of Speech Therapists.

To this complex aspect of medicine he has combined two personal qualities, the cool systematic analytical approach to diagnosis which is characteristic of the trained neurologist and the humane and warm hearted attitude to practical problems, which we like to think is more characteristic of the paediatrician. Whether or not we flatter ourselves unduly, these qualities have certainly been conspicuous in Neil Gordon's approach to his child patients.

For his first 16 years in Manchester Neil Gordon was the sole consultant in paediatric neurology and for a number of years he had no junior staff whatsoever. But he gradually built up—at what expense of time, energy, gentle powers of persuasion, and, doubtless, frustration we cannot calculate—what must be regarded as the best staffed and organised hospital and community based service for child neurology of any health region in the country. At the end of one of his papers Gordon wrote 'it does not need a clairvoyant to realise that these remarks have been written by a doctor working in a hospital based unit' but it is important for those of you unfamiliar with his work to know that throughout his working life Neil Gordon held clinics not only at Pendlebury and Booth Hall, but also at peripheral hospitals, institutions for handicapped children, and special schools.

Assessment centres, first promoted by the Sheldon Committee, are now widespread through health districts but Neil Gordon, in collaboration with Dr Robert Mackay and Dr George Komrower, was one of the first paediatricians in the United Kingdom to set up a comprehensive multidisciplinary assessment centre.

Paediatric neurology in Britain owes much to the initiative and enthusiasm of the late Ronnie Mac Keith (our James Spence Medallist for 1972) and I know that Neil Gordon would like me to add that Ronnie Mac Keith had a greater influence on his career and life's work than did anyone else.

Out of the international meetings held biennially at St Edmund Hall from 1958 the UK Group of Paediatric Neurologists emerged, and its transition into the British Paediatric Neurology Association formally took place in January 1975. Neil Gordon was unanimously elected President, or Chairman as the post was termed at first, and he served in this capacity for six years. As a consequence of the British initiative other European countries set up societies for paediatric neurology and these were federated in 1971. Neil Gordon was the second honorary secretary of the European Federation and was elected President for a two year term in 1980. He has also served as a member of the Board of the International Child Neurology Association.

Even a brief account of Neil Gordon's life and work should not conclude without some reference to him as a committee man. And here I want to read you two brief quotations.

'As Chairman of any committee he was difficult to revile and he had the rare knack of knowing when to be patient, when to intervene and what to say in summing up any difficult discussion', and 'he did much work in committees, which means that it was anonymous and merged with the work of others. Rarely has a man done so much for the Association and been so inconspicuous in the doing of it.'

These two statements were written not of Neil Gordon but of Ronald Grey Gordon, his father, and the Association referred to was the BMA not the BPA or the BPNA. Ronald Grey Gordon was a distinguished physician in Bath and consulted in neurology, psychotherapy and paediatrics. His published works include books on normal and abnormal personality, on child psychiatry, mental defect, paralysis in childhood and one slim volume entitled *Autolycus, or the Future of Miscreant Youth*. To what extent this remarkable congruity of personality, interests and attainments is attributable to nature or nurture I leave you to contemplate.

Neil Gordon—you would be the first to admit that you have not made important advances in the basic science of your discipline. Furthermore, you have said to me with reference to your published papers that 'none has been earth shaking'. Making allowances for your genuine, if excessive, modesty and for the metaphoric absurdity, that is possibly true, although many of your writings have exercised an important influence in their time. What we honour you for is something different, it is for your role in the development of paediatric neurology in Great Britain and abroad and for a lifetime of arduous, compassionate, and highly effective *service* to children—a record unsurpassed by any of our contemporaries—and this makes you a most fitting and distinguished recipient of our highest award.