

Obituary

Owen Lyndon Wade

Clinical Pharmacologist
1921–2008

Martin Kendall

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Owen Wade was one of the Founding Fathers of clinical pharmacology and therapeutics in the UK. He created two new departments, one in Belfast, the other in Birmingham. He contributed enormously to medical education, drug regulation, drug utilization, drug safety and drug information – and there were many other achievements.

He was born in Penarth, South Wales in 1921. His father was a surgeon and his three brothers also qualified in medicine. Two of his brothers became surgeons, one in Cardiff and one in Edinburgh, the other became a general practitioner (GP) working in London. When Owen became a Professor in Belfast, they had the UK well covered.

As a teenager, Owen used to help his father giving the anaesthetics (cloth and bottle) and learning to do the operations. Well before starting his clinical course he had removed an appendix, repaired a hernia and enucleated a prostate – all performed rapidly before the anaesthetic wore off.

He went to Emmanuel College, Cambridge and obtained First-Class Honours in Tripos I and Tripos II, the latter after a period of research on the pituitary.

In 1942 he started his clinical course at University College London. There was a shortage of senior medical staff, and he recalled that students had to look after themselves and take clinical responsibility at a very early stage.

For a short time he was the only person covering the medical wards of a small hospital. On another occasion, he had to deliver a baby on the platform of Warren Street tube station. Coping with the spectators was a challenge, but he used the old trick of sending them off to find boiling water.

The war provided lots of excitement, and he and the staff often had to take cover. In his obstetrics examination in January 1945, he was trying to talk about placenta praevia to Professor Hilda Lloyd whilst conscious of the sound of an approaching V-bomb. Sensing her increasing concern, he asked if they should both get under the table, which they did. They were not hit and he passed the exam.

After qualifying, he did a 6-month house job and then in 1946 became the resident medical officer of University

College Hospital. This was a medically and administratively demanding job. All admissions were arranged through his office, and he had to see all emergency admissions. For 12 months he had no time off. Over the next 15–18 months he did a surgical house job and decided not to become a surgeon, and instead he passed the Membership of the Royal College of Physicians examination. He married Margaret in March 1948, which he said was the best thing he ever did.

The next step up was to the Pneumoconiosis Research Unit in South Wales. Research, lung function studies, statistics, an MD – a happy time. He also became a very competent chest physician. Then, to Birmingham as a lecturer on the Professorial unit and a move to cardiac catheter studies. Owen was intimately involved and was the first to catheterize a normal subject at rest and during exercise. It was his team leader who kindly left a letter absolving his colleagues if anything went wrong, like sudden death. Nothing did go wrong and Owen was catheterized by him at the next session. Twelve subjects were studied, including the ward sister and the catheter team nurse, both willing volunteers. No ethics committee, no defibrillator.

In Belfast Medical School in 1957 they had a rather poor basic pharmacology department that had a bad reputation for teaching. They wanted to establish an active clinical pharmacology unit and appointed Owen. He was just 36, had only been a senior lecturer for 5 months, with no special training in clinical pharmacology and no specific interest in therapeutics. The department had one senior technician, who was a great asset, but no other staff, and he was offered a few beds on someone else's ward. Further, there was some antagonism between the two teaching hospitals and between NHS and university staff. The 'troubles' in Northern Ireland had yet to start. He was there from 1957 to 1971.

Owen set about producing a course of lectures and practicals, having never done either before. He gave all the lectures and ran all the practicals. He also developed interactive patient management sessions – 'road shows' that filled the lecture theatre from 16.00 to 17.00 h on Fridays.

They were very practical and very popular. In a practical on antihypertensive agents, one student collapsed and had to be resuscitated – unfortunately, the Vice Chancellor's son. Over the early years his clinical work expanded and prospered. He was the first consultant to have beds in both teaching hospitals, the Royal Victoria and Belfast City.

After 18 months in Belfast, he found time to think about drugs. He discovered the computer-based system used in Northern Ireland to pay pharmacists and developed it to provide data on prescribing by all the provinces GPs. This was the start of the Drug Utilisation Research Group, a Europe-wide project in which Owen was one of the leading lights. This was pioneering work and earned him an international reputation. He also developed an interest in the adverse effects of drugs and became one of the pioneers in this field.

He moved to Birmingham in 1971 to set up the Department of Clinical Pharmacology and Therapeutics and became the Dean from 1978 to 1984, and then the Vice Principal and Pro-Vice Chancellor 1984–1986.

His work at national level was impressive and perhaps best summarized as a list of key appointments:

Drug regulation and safety

- Dunlop Committee 1963–1970
- Chair, Adverse Drug Reactions Subcommittee 1967–1970
- Medicines Commission 1969–1977
- Chair, Committee of Review of Medicines 1969–1977
- British National Formulary (BNF)
- Joint Formulary Committee 1963–1985
- Chair: 1978–1985
- MRC Clinical Research Board 1969–1974
- GMC member 1979–1983
- WHO Consultant Advisor 1960–1991.

The BNF 1948–1978 was published about every 3 years. It was a medicinal recipe book, with lots of old-fashioned measures and Latin terms that was becoming increasingly

unhelpful, unpopular and out of date. Owen became the Chairman of the Formulary Committee in 1978 and with others created the 'modern' paperback BNF, which is published every 6 months and is regarded by many as the prescribers' bible. This was a huge achievement.

Finally, Owen Wade was Dean of Birmingham Medical School 1978–1984. Technically, his Deanship started at a minute past midnight on 1 September; by midday, he had had to shut half the medical school and his Professor of Virology had cut his own throat and was dying. The problem was smallpox. Some research was being undertaken in the medical school and a photographer in the Anatomy department became ill in August. She was diagnosed with smallpox on the 24th, and died from the disease soon after. Trade union power in 1978 was at its peak and the Association of Scientific, Technical and Managerial Staffs union made life very difficult. However, Owen did well. He took command, learned all about smallpox, took expert advice, kept the relevant documents in good order, looked after his staff and they gave him a lot of support. The medical school was battered but unbowed and lived to fight another day. Four of his Professors became Presidents of their respective colleges.

Owen Wade achieved a lot. He ascribed this to

- being cheerful, optimistic and a good communicator
- his wife, his home, his ability to sleep well and a strong stomach
- his capacity to get on well with colleagues and students
- having colleagues who helped him.

His colleagues would say that he was very able, worked hard, was well organized and was 'able to keep lots of balls in the air at the same time'.

In 1983 Owen was awarded a CBE, and in 1989 he was given an honorary doctorate by the Queen's University Belfast.

Owen Wade was no ordinary man.