Obituaries

Melvin Yahr

Neurologist who revolutionised the treatment of Parkinson's disease

Melvin D Yahr was a pioneer in the development of the amino acid L-dopa as a treatment for Parkinson's disease. In the 1960s he conducted one of the earliest randomised clinical trials of L-dopa—a precursor of dopamine—which showed that the drug could help “unfreeze” people who had the disease, easing symptoms such as rigidity and tremors. The writer and neurologist Oliver Sacks described in his 1974 book *Awakenings*—later made into a film—how using L-dopa in people with Parkinson's virtually brought statues to life. Nowadays L-dopa remains the most widely used treatment for Parkinson's, with millions of people taking it worldwide.

Yahr's research built on the work of the Nobel laureate Arvid Carlsson, who in the 1950s had shown that Parkinson's could arise from depletion of dopamine. It was not long after Yahr's trial that patients were able to benefit from his revolutionary findings. By 1972, only a few years after the publication of his study, it had been prescribed to 1.5 million people in the United States.

Melvin Yahr was born in 1917 in New York City, the youngest of six children of immigrant orthodox Jewish parents from Austro-Hungary. His father owned a bakery. After qualifying, and internship and residency at Lenox Hill Hospital in New York, he served in the US army from 1944 to 1947 with the rank of major. He rose to H Houston Merritt professor of neurology at

Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons before becoming professor of neurology and chairman of the department at Mount Sinai School of Medicine, New York City. From 1992 Yahr was the Aidekman professor of neurological research at Mount Sinai.

Yahr established and later brought to Mount Sinai the country's first multidisciplinary centre for research in Parkinson's disease and related disorders. During his tenure there, he built the department into

one of the largest in the country. Under his leadership, the centre, composed of basic scientists and clinical investigators working in various neuroscience disciplines, made significant contributions to the understanding and treatment of these disorders. He helped to train more than 100 neurologists.

He co-wrote more than 300 scientific papers, many on Parkinson's disease, including one in the journal *Neurology* in 1967 that described a five stage scale, known as the Hoehn-Yahr scale, for determining the severity of Parkinson's.

Yahr, who believed strongly in basic research, was much sought after for his blunt, outspoken opinions. He was consultant to many groups including the National Institute of Neurological Communicative Disorders and Stroke, the National Research Council, the National Academy of Sciences, and the New York City Board of Education. He was president of the American Board of Neurology and Psychiatry, the American Neurological Association, and the Association for Research in Nervous and Mental Diseases.

Predeceased by his wife, Felicia, he leaves four daughters and five grandchildren. [FRED CHARATAN]

Melvin D Yahr, emeritus professor of neurology Mount Sinai Medical Center, New York City (b New York City 1917; q New York University 1943), died from lung cancer on 1 January 2004.

Thelma Rowett Asfour (née Gaunt)

Former deputy medical officer of health Chester, Cheshire (b Birkenhead, Merseyside, 1916; q Liverpool 1939), died from heart failure on 21 December 2003.

After qualifying Thelma was a general practitioner and then spent the war years in various Liverpool hospitals. She married in 1940 and had a son, but she and her husband divorced after the war ended. Thelma took qualifications in public health and tropical medicine, and was appointed lady officer of health in Georgetown, the capital of what was then British Guiana. She married her second husband and had two

children. Postings to Nigeria and Zambia followed. In 1970 she and her husband returned to Chester, where Thelma worked in public health and family planning. [MARY ASFOUR]

Robert George Dalton

Consultant haematologist Cheltenham General Hospital (b 1954; q Bristol 1978; FRCP, FRCPath), d 31 October 2003.

Those who knew Bob would not be surprised to learn that when, in 2002, he found himself being outpaced on a bike by his teenage daughter he sought a medical explanation. The finding of anaemia was rapidly followed

by a diagnosis of gastric malignancy with established liver spread. Bob was appointed as a singlehanded consultant to the General Hospital, Cheltenham, in 1988. He swiftly established specialist clinics and close links

with oncology colleagues. Bob was co-founder of Cheltenham's Leukaemia and Intensive Chemotherapy Charity (LINC) and a force behind fund raising to provide a new outpatient suite. He leaves a wife, Rosie, and two children. [JANET ROPNER, CLIVE BOWMAN]

Daksha Emson

Specialist registrar in community and rehabilitation psychiatry Oxleas NHS Trust (b 1966; q Royal London Hospital 1992; BSc, MSc, MRCPsych), d 27 October 2000.

Daksha was diagnosed as having bipolar affective disorder after a serious suicide attempt while a medical student. After house jobs she was appointed to the United Medical and Dental School of Guy's and St Thomas's Hospitals training scheme in psychiatry. Daksha was to take up her first consultant post in community and rehabilitation psychiatry in February 2001. The day before she was to resume her medication, she had become psychotic and in an act of "protecting our daughter," Freya, she gave her back to God. Daksha would be reunited with Freya three weeks later (clinically described as an extended suicide). The independent inquiry into the care and treatment of Daksha and Freya (*BMJ* 2003;327:1008) will enable Daksha, even in death, to have a positive impact on the care and treatment of other mothers with bipolar illness, and also on the care and treatment of other healthcare workers, stigmatised because of having been diagnosed as having mental illness. She leaves a husband, David. [DAVID EMSON]

This obituary was delayed because of the coroner's inquest into the deaths and because of the inquiry into the care and treatment of Daksha and Freya only up to one year after the date of death.

William Alexander Gillespie

Emeritus professor of clinical bacteriology University of Bristol (b Dublin 1912; q Trinity College Dublin 1936), d 13 August 2003. During a long career William Gillespie energetically pursued his interests in the fundamentals and practicalities of infection control in hospitals. His most notable contribution was the establishment of the importance of closed urinary drainage after operative procedures and indwelling catheterisation, and of ancillary measures in support of this. Early in the occurrence of cross infection by multi-resistant strains of

Staphylococcus aureus, he determined the need for multiple control measures, and he was influential in the introduction of central departments using reliable methods to provide sterile supplies. He had enthusiasms for the Italian language and literature, gardening, archaeology, and the history of medicine. He leaves a wife, Marjorie, and two children. [DAVID SPELLER, GRAHAM AYLIFFE]

Former consultant obstetrician and gynaecologist the Hillingdon Hospital (b Berlin 1924; q Middlesex Hospital 1947; FRCS, FRCOG), died from cardiac failure on 1 December 2003.

George was appointed consultant obstetrician to Hillingdon Hospital in 1964. He played an important part in developing women's services and establishing links with London teaching hospitals for training posts and medical student tuition. His interests included the study of fetal growth retardation and the development of a cervical screening programme. His skills in communication and persuasion resulted in collaboration with nearby Brunel University and the early computerisation of clinical obstetric records. He leaves a wife, Gill; two daughters; and four grandchildren. [PETER DOVEY]

Selahattin Koloğlu

Former professor and head of department of endocrinology Ankara University Medical

School (b Elazığ 1923; q Istanbul University Medical School 1946), died from cerebrovascular disease on 4 November 2003.

Selahattin Koloğlu trained in general medicine in Paris. He was a NATO scholar, training in endocrinology at the State University of New York. He pioneered the development of endocrinology in Turkey, founding the first department of endocrinology and metabolism at Ankara University Medical School in 1974. He developed a particular interest in thyroid disease, becoming a world authority on endemic goitre. He leaves his wife, Bilkay; two children; and three grandchildren. [PHILIP E HARRIS]

John Clive Baird Nesfield

Former general practitioner Whitstable, Kent, and medical officer St Augustine's Hospital, Chartham, Kent (b Kashmir 1913; q London/Cambridge 1938), d 6 November 2003. John spent his early years as a doctor in the Royal Army Medical Corps in India and Burma. The bulk of his working life was spent as a general practitioner. John spent the last 10 years before retirement as a medical officer in psychiatry. An eccentric, he lived in a house full of exotic treasures in which another eccentric doctor, Somerset Maugham, had grown up. He leaves a wife, Stella; three children; and one grandchild. [ANDREW POLMEAR]

William Stephen

Former principal medical officer HM Prison Service (b Fraserburgh 1918; q Aberdeen 1942; MRCPsych), died from a brain haemorrhage on 10 December 2003.

Bill was of small stature yet of engaging personality. He served as a surgeon lieutenant commander in the Royal Navy during the second world war on destroyers patrolling the French coastline and protecting landing craft on D Day. Demobbed he took hospital work in Devon for a while, and met at Devonport a former fellow commander, one destined to become director of prison medical services, Bill also joined and remained in that same service until he retired in 1982. Predeceased by his first wife, Joan-Mary, he leaves his second wife, Carol, and three children. [JOHN TOPP]

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