Clinical Neurophysiology 130 (2019) 410–411

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Clinical Neurophysiology

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/clinph

Obituary

Graham Harding, 1937–2018

Graham Harding, past Secretary of the IFCN and past President of the BSCN, died on October 20th, 2018. His main contributions were in photosensitive epilepsy and evoked potentials of the visual system and he was one of the first to recognise the potential of magnetoencephalography (MEG).

It was whilst studying psychology at University College London that he developed a lifelong fascination with EEG's power to record real time brain activity from the scalp. Graduating in 1961, he returned to his childhood city, Birmingham, to read for a PhD in EEG in psychiatry. Two years into the thesis, in 1963, he founded the Clinical Neurophysiology Unit at Aston University. He headed this from its inception to his retirement in 2002, building it into both the largest research department in Clinical Neurophysiology in the UK and a renowned clinical centre as well.

In Birmingham he met Peter Jeavons, a paediatric neurologist, who was to become his friend and co-worker over the next 35 years. Together they undertook a prolonged and in-depth study of a cohort of 460 patients with photosensitive epilepsy, exploring, for instance, the adequate stimuli to elicit photoparoxysmal responses. They published the first monograph on the subject in 1974; many papers and more books ensued.

Harding also recognised the dangers of flashing lights in broadcast media very early and drafted guidelines to minimize risk to photosensitive patients which were adopted in the UK and, later, in countries round the world. His initiative has therefore had lasting societal impact. Japanese colleagues may remember his scientific support to the Japanese government following the "Pokémon Shock" in December 1997.

Policing these guidelines was a long process, requiring the review of video, frame by frame. So, with the help of his wife, Pamela, he helped develop an automated device for this termed, appropriately enough, The Harding Flash & Pattern Analyser. He was subsequently asked about the safety of other flickering lights, including from wind farm blades and somewhat incongruously, whether contrasting coloured balls posed a danger by the British Isles Bowls Council.

Another area of interest was visual evoked potentials, from both cortical and subcortical areas. He studied various conditions including multiple sclerosis, optic atrophy and used peri-operative studies to predict outcome after surgery. When reports began to emerge of the retinotoxic effect of vigabatrin he was one the first to quantify it through multifocal electroretinography.

He was amongst the earliest in the UK to recognise the potential of MEG, buying a single channel MEG system in 1988, and in 1992, through collaboration with the Institute of Physics in Moscow, the first multi-channel system in the UK. In 2000, Graham led a successful Wellcome Trust bid to secure the UK's first whole head MEG system. Then, in 2002, he retired to allow others to take it forward.

Passionate about education, he supervised over 40 PhD and MD students and was unusually supportive of trainees at national society meetings. He was the first Professor of Clinical Neurophysiology in the UK, President of the British Society for Clinical Neurophysiology (BSCN), Chairman of the International VEP Standards Committee, and Secretary of the International Federation of Clinical Neurophysiology. He was awarded a D.Sc. from Aston in 1978, and received the Grey Walter Medal from the BSCN – its highest honour. Unusually for a non-medically qualified person, he was awarded honorary Membership of the Royal College of Physicians of London (1998) and then Fellowship in 2008.

Graham was something of a showman. For one public lecture, at Aston Great Hall, he arranged a live link to the magnetoencephalography lab. He entered the stage, which was flooded with dry ice fog, complete with music and cape. He entitled his talk 'Mystic MEG', (after the stage name of a well-known clairvoyant). In retirement his main hobby was model trains and he had a 750 feet long track in his garden. A skilled metal worker, like his father, he built his own engines powered initially by coal, gas or methylated spirits. Later he moved to electric power, not for environmental reasons, but because they were lighter to carry. He was famous locally for his monthly steam-ups, to which all were welcome. One year the Japanese Ambassador, himself an avid model-railroader, turned up in his limo, flags flying. Next was a working replica of an early 1900s steam car, which ran out of steam as he was driving his son and girlfriend to their prom. On another occasion, at a fete, it caught fire. After that, in his 70s, he bought a Morgan 3-wheeler instead, seeing it through its construction at the Morgan factory in Malvern before delighting in racing it up Speed Hill Climbs.

He married twice; first to Margaret Wagstaff, with whom he had two daughters Cathy Cutting and Laura Cooper, and then to Pam Evans. When they met he was wearing a loud multi-coloured tie complete with hot air balloons. Pam thought anyone wearing a

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.clinph.2018.12.002

tie like that must have a good sense of humour. He did, but the tie reflected his dress sense alone. They had a son, Anthony, who was one of a group of young children in whom he plotted the development of colour visual evoked potentials over the first couple of months after birth.

Graham Harding will be missed by many for his insights and research, and for his work for the IFCN; colleagues will also miss him for his humour, generosity and spirit too.

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Accepted 9 December 2018

Available online 19 January 2019