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Obituary

Obituary for Paul Townsend Plastic and Reconstructive Surgeon

Paul Leslie Gordon Townsend

27th December 1937 to 11th August 2019



Paul was one of the fathers of reconstructive microsurgery nationally and internationally.

He was born in Hendon in 1937 and he grew up in Radlet in Hertfordshire. His father was first an army officer and then an accountant. In the early years of the war, Paul could recall watching bombs dropping on London. He was educated at Epsom College and took his medical degree at University College Hospital, London (UCH) during which time he took a group of fellow students to Russia. It must have been quite a challenge. The Bay of Pigs episode was in 1961 and the political climate between east and west at its most tense. He intercalated and passed his BSc with Honours in 1960, followed by his medical degree in 1963.

He married Mary, whom he had met at UCH in 1967 and in 1968, having passed the Fellowship of the Royal College of Surgeons of England, they went to Canada where he worked in British Columbia, passing the FRCS(Canada) in 1972 but they decided to return to the U.K. He worked as a registrar at Odstock Hospital in Salisbury and as a senior registrar in Frenchay Hospital in Bristol. In 1978, Paul was awarded the prestigious Mowlem Award by the British Association of Plastic Surgeons for the best clinical research performed in the previous 4 years. Steven Gilbert, who was a visiting Registrar in Bristol, recalled, "As a Senior Registrar, Paul always exuded that air of confidence, ingenuity, technical ability and friendliness which marked him out as a future leader...."

Paul became a consultant Plastic Surgeon in Frenchay in 1979, having spent time in Melbourne with Mr. Ian Taylor, working at the dawn of microsurgery. Whilst there, he developed and published the DCIA (Deep Circumflex Iliac Artery) flap and vascularised nerve grafts. He was also the first to 'double barrel' a free fibula flap. All remain mainstays of Reconstructive Plastic Surgery to this day. He was one of the founders of the 'GIT (Ian Taylor) Travelling Club', for those who had undertaken fellowships in Melbourne.

Paul continued at the forefront of microsurgery. His first microsurgery case at Frenchay took 22 hrs. His work saved many a motorcyclist from becoming an amputee.

From 1992, until his retirement from the NHS in 2005, he was the Senior Consultant Plastic Surgeon at Frenchay Hospital, Bristol. He chaired the South West Advisory Committee in Plastic Surgery and was the Regional Specialty Representative in Plastic Surgery for the Royal College of Surgeons of England. He was a member of BAPS (British Association of Plastic Surgeons), BAAPS (British Association of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons), BSSH (British Society for Surgery of the Hand), BBA (British Burns Association), the MSG (Melanoma Study Group), the South West Surgical Club, the Cosham Medical Society and the Bristol Medico-Legal Society. He published 18 peer reviewed papers.

Paul established the first microsurgery practice laboratory in the country and he developed the use of the human placenta, perfused with saline via a pump, as a surgical model. During this time, Paul served on BAPS council (1985-1988) and on the Specialist Advisory Committee for Plastic Surgery and the editorial board of the British Journal of Plastic Surgery. He became the lead clinician for the Frenchay Plastic Surgery Unit (1990-1993) and then the Director of Surgery for hospital.

Paul was delightful to have as a senior colleague. He had a prodigious work rate and instituted the first Pigmented Lesion Clinic in the country as well the use of the dermatoscope for the early diagnosis of melanoma. He could see 90 patients with out breaking sweat or the patients feeling short changed. He supported SCaRF, the skin cancer charity,

from its inception and also Action Aid. He went to Uganda to perform reconstructive surgery and he set up the Laser Centre of the South West. Paul had an excellent working relationships with both clinical and non-clinical staff.

Paul worked as a consultant in Bristol Plastic Surgery until a few months before his death from pancreatic cancer and, into late 70s, his complication and incomplete excision rates for the skin cancer excisions he performed were less than colleagues half his years, and all performed without the need for glasses or loupes!

His wife, Mary, "his boys" (Andy, Nick and Chris) and their families were the focus of Paul's life to the very end. He loved gardening in his spare time but tended to be accident prone where ladders and walls were concerned! He held a long time passion for Bristol Rugby. Paul bore his illness with great fortitude and dignity. He never complained and, only a few days before he died in hospital from pancreatic cancer, he was discussing his family tree and enjoying the more disreputable side of his ancestors in Ireland.

His words were always measured, spoken with reassuring calm and always meaningful. He had a natural gift for going

straight to the point, a talented problem solver, someone to whom colleagues would always go for advice knowing that he would give his opinion with un-intrusive modesty. Paul would never impose his view but would lead colleagues, patients and staff to finding a solution, always with charming, gentle manners. Paul's legacy lives on in the many patients he treated, restoring their lives and in the many more he continues to help through the hands of the numerous surgeons who daily use the techniques he developed. He will always be remembered for his passion, integrity and dedication to his patients, our profession and, most importantly, for his kindness towards the people who had the fortune to meet him. All those who have expressed their condolences have said;

"He was a real gentleman".

Nigel Mercer

Antonio Orlando

*As previously published in the British Medical Journal."