OBITUARY

Norman Henry Ashton CBE, DSc (Lond), FRCP, FRCS, FRCPATH, FRCP, KSTJ, CBE, DSc (Lond), FRCS, FRCPATH, FRCOPHTH, FRS, (d 4 January 2000)

Professor Norman Ashton, a world leader in research into eye diseases, died on Tuesday 4 January 2000 at the age of 86. He was director of pathology at the Institute of Ophthalmology for 30 years and laid the foundations of the study of the pathological basis of eye disease in the UK. His legacy to us comprises not only the results of his own research but also the structures he has left behind. His clear thinking was central to the creation of the current Institute of Ophthalmology building on a joint site with Moorfields Eye Hospital. And by pivotal contributions to the establishment and growth of the national charity Fight for Sight, he has ensured that the current generation of researchers are in a position to carry on where he left off.

Born in London in 1913, Professor Ashton read medicine at King’s College London and Westminster Hospital Medical School. After qualifying in 1939 he specialised in pathology and was appointed as a pathologist to the Kent and Canterbury Hospital from 1941 to 1945 before carrying out his military service with the Royal Army Medical Corp in West Africa and Egypt from 1945 to 1947.

In 1948, the Institute of Ophthalmology invited him to be director of pathology, a position he held until his retirement in 1978. During his time at the institute he built up a laboratory of international repute that has contributed extensively to eye research and provided a clinical service to Moorfields Eye Hospital, as well as hospitals throughout the world. During this period he provided an inspirational focus for innumerable clinicians and basic scientists who he introduced to the exciting world of applied science, and its potential to resolve clinical problems. In parallel, he was responsible for the training of the first generation of ophthalmic pathologists in the UK.

His major research contributions related to diseases of the retinal blood vessels: diabetic retinopathy, hypertensive retinopathy and, most notably, the retinopathy of prematurity. In respect of the last of these, he made the key discovery that excessive oxygen given to compensate for breathing problems associated with premature birth could cause an obliteration of growing retinal blood vessels followed by organised regrowth and scarring. His observations led to the careful control of oxygen delivery to premature infants and saved the sight of countless babies. He was interested in all aspects of ocular pathology but one that held a particular fascination was the study of worm infestations. He was the first in Europe to identify Toxocara canis (the dog roundworm) as a cause of retinal disease in children.

One of his most significant contributions to the development of ophthalmic pathology as a discipline was his key role in establishing the European Pathology Society, of which he was made life president. This truly European enterprise, which is as healthy and vigorous today as it has ever been, was in many ways ahead of its time and has done much to improve diagnostic standards and to raise the profile of the subspecialty.

A founder of Fight for Sight in 1965, Professor Ashton was its chairman from 1980 until 1991 when he became a patron. Fight for Sight is one of the foremost charities supporting eye research in the UK and has raised millions of pounds. In honour of his achievements in research, Fight for Sight, the new Institute of Ophthalmology building in Bath Street was named after him; a new research wing of this building was opened last year.

Professor Ashton saw an intellectual challenge in everything around him and was endowed with limitless curiosity. His imagination was captured by a friend’s frustration at not being able to catch trout in his favourite stretch of river. By application of his usual thorough approach to such matters, Norman discovered that the eyes of the trout in that stretch of the river were infected with a trematode fluke that damaged their lens, making them blind and unable to see the angler’s fly.

Although his world revolved around his devotion to ophthalmic research, he still had time for extramural pursuits. He was for many years a steward at Westminster Abbey and was often invited to be an after dinner speaker. His polish, sophisticated wit, and immaculate delivery were legendary. His speech at the opening of the Wilmer Eye Institute, Baltimore, is renowned throughout the profession as, in many ways, it overshadowed that of fellow speaker Bob Hope, who was later heard to express his gratitude that Norman was not a professional comedian. Norman was also a talented artist, taking special delight in still life paintings in oils, and to receive a photograph of his most recent effort in lieu of a Christmas card was a rare privilege.

Professor Ashton received many academic honours during his career. Most notably, these include his election in 1971 as a fellow of the Royal Society and his appointment in 1976 by Her Majesty the Queen as Commander of the Order of the British Empire. Numerous other awards include the Doyle Medal in 1960, the Gonin Medal for ophthalmic pathology in 1978, the first Jules Stein Award for outstanding ophthalmic achievement in 1981 (with A Patz), the International Pisart Vision Award in 1991, the Buchanan Medal of the Royal Society in 1996, and the Helen Keller prize for Vision Research in 1998. He was president of five medical societies of pathology and ophthalmology, was given the mastership of the Worshipful Society of Apothecaries, the award of an honorary doctorate by the University of Chicago in 1973, and was made an emeritus professor of pathology at the University of London in 1978.

On a personal level, his warmth and integrity earned him the affection and esteem of all. His loss will be deeply felt by the Institute of Ophthalmology, Fight for Sight, and Professor Ashton’s many friends and clinical and research colleagues throughout the world.

ADAM SILLITO
Director, Institute of Ophthalmology
PHIL LUTHERT
Deputy Director, Institute of Ophthalmology

NOTICES

Community participation in eye health and trachoma and the SAFE strategy
The latest issues of Community Eye Health (nos 31 and 32) discuss community participation in eye health (issue 31) and trachoma and the SAFE strategy (issue 32). For further information please contact Community Eye Health, International Centre for Eye Health, Institute of Ophthalmology, 11–43 Bath Street, London EC1V 9EL. (Tel: (+44) 171 608 6909/6910/6923; fax: (+44) 171 250 3207; email: eyeresource@ucl.ac.uk) Annual subscription £25. Free to workers in developing countries.

Residents’ Foreign Exchange Programme
Any resident interested in spending a period of up to one month in departments of ophthalmology in the Netherlands, Finland, Ireland, Germany, Denmark, France, Austria, or Portugal should apply to: Mr Robert Achesson, Secretary of the Foreign Exchange Committee, European Board of Ophthalmology, Institute of Ophthalmology, University College Dublin, 60 Eccles Street, Dublin 7, Ireland.

American Institute of Ultrasound in Medicine
The American Institute of Ultrasound in Medicine will hold the 44th annual convention in San Francisco, California on 2–5 April 2000. Further details: AIUM Professional Development Department, 14750 Sweitzer Lane, Suite 100, Laurel, MD 20707-5906 (tel: 800-638-5353; fax: 301-498-4100; email: conv_edu@aium.org; website: www.aium.org).

XXII Tuebingen Detachment Course
The XXII Tuebingen Detachment Course, retinal and vitreous surgery, will be held in the congress centre Incheba, Bratislava, Slovak Republic 6–7 April 2000 preceding the congress on retinal detachment of the Slovak Ophthalmological Society 8–10 April 2000. Further details: Professor Peter Strmen 81369 Bratislava, Miczkiewiczova 13 (tel/fax: 00421-7-52964641; email: strmen@faneba.sk).