

Obituary

**Professor Emeritus George Hector Percival,
Ph.D., MD, FRCP (Edin.), DPH**



George Percival, formerly Grant Professor of Dermatology in the University of Edinburgh, died on 3 April 1983. He was 81. He was educated at George Watson's College, Edinburgh, before studying medicine at Edinburgh University where he graduated MB Ch.B. in 1923. In 1924 he joined the skin department at the Royal Infirmary, took the MRCP (Edin.) in 1926 and obtained his Ph.D. in 1927. He was elected FRCP (Edin.) and proceeded MD in 1931. In 1936 he was appointed physician to the skin department and 10 years later become Grant Professor of Dermatology in the University of Edinburgh, a post he held until his retirement in 1967. In 1968 the title of Emeritus Professor of Dermatology was conferred on him.

Professor Percival was the President of the British Association of Dermatologists in 1961 when it visited Edinburgh and was made an honorary member of the Association in 1972. His international reputation was recognized by corresponding and honorary memberships of the Australian, American, Belgian, Brazilian, Danish, French, Italian and Swedish dermatological societies. Among his many publications were the well known *Introduction to Dermatology*, which ran through many editions, and *Histopathology of the Skin*.

He married Kate Dawson in 1937, and they had a son and a daughter.

After qualification, he had the good fortune to work under A.R. Cushny in the Department of Materia Medica. He often referred to this period as the turning point in his career, giving him an introduction to experimental work and also experience of an academic department. He fell into dermatology quite by chance. Missing clinical work, he set out for the Ear, Nose and Throat Department to enquire about a post but passed the Skin Department where a part-time job was advertised. He applied for it on the spot and was taken on, having no idea that he would devote the next 42 years of his professional life to the specialty.

Like his predecessors in the department, Jamieson, Walker and Low, Percival studied at continental clinics. During 1928 and 1929 he worked in Paris, Lausanne and Zürich with several leading dermatologists including Civatte, Dupont, Sabouraud and Bloch. In many ways his initial meeting with Bloch epitomised his character and style. Having spent a week at the Zürich clinic with minimal attention from the great man, he went to Bloch's laboratory and in no uncertain terms, told him that he had not travelled so far to join the end of his entourage. Bloch, although surprised and hurt, must have been impressed by this keen but forthright visitor, because he spend much time with him during the rest of his stay. Indeed, after this, they corresponded regularly not only about the capricious dopa reaction but about dermatological research in general.

It is hardly surprising that Percival soon saw beyond the 'see and treat' routine that was so much of dermatology in the late 1920s and 1930s. His intelligence, experience of experimental work, and ambition demanded a more inquisitive approach. He embarked upon pharmacological research and wrote a series of papers with C.P. Stewart on parathyroid hormone, calcium metabolism and the skin. He studied blood vessels in inflammatory skin disorders and was spurred on by the recent discovery of histamine to investigate the nature of inflammatory mediators in the skin. A paper with C.M. Scott on 'The action of blister fluid on the isolated rat uterus', published in 1931 indicated that mediators other than histamine were involved in some blistering skin diseases. This view, received very coolly by Sir Thomas Lewis, led to a short and strained meeting between Lewis and Percival. Not deterred, the young and enthusiastic Scot returned to his home base to continue his research, and Bloch described him as the *Feu Sacré* of dermatological research in Britain at that time.

Percival said that when he joined the department of dermatology in Edinburgh there was not a single histological specimen to be found in it and that biopsies were special occasions. Convinced of the diagnostic and educational value of histopathology, he was one of the key figures in Britain in establishing the diagnostic role of histopathology of the skin. He threw his full energy and enthusiasm into assembling a systematic collection of histopathological material and encouraged those who trained in the department to make full use of it. *Histopathology of the Skin* written with A. Murray Drennan and T.C. Dodds (1947) was well received and provided much practical help for pathologists struggling with dermatological sections.

In 1945 Sir Robert Grant, largely as a result of his association with Percival, donated £70,000 to the University and £10,000 to the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh to enable a Chair of Dermatology to be established. This was the first University Chair of Dermatology in Britain and Percival was appointed its first professor. Recognition of dermatology as a full academic subject in its own right marked a major step in British dermatology. Under his guidance the main work of the department, apart from clinical trials, concerned the histopathogenesis of eczema, bullous eruptions and the reticuloses and the pathogenesis of acne. He was a most effective teacher and always pointed out to undergraduates that, in the examination of patients with skin disease, they had a unique opportunity to observe pathological processes running their course and to correlate cellular pathology and derangement of function with the clinical findings.

The main characteristic of the man was his intelligence; and that allied to charm of manner and a relaxed attitude to events (which enabled him to stand aside from them, to look at what was going on, and then intervene decisively when he judged the time was right) was the mainspring of his success. Most of his contemporaries in dermatology were either unaware of his great ability, or were vaguely disturbed by it. At times he seemed contemptuous of them, his main criticisms being that they were obsessed by morphological minutiae yet unconcerned about, and ignorant of, pathogenetic mechanisms. He also thought that London had much to learn from Edinburgh on dressing regimens and the out-patient treatment of skin diseases. He held strong views, and there was an emotional barrier to accepting facts that ran counter to his own position. He was formidable in dispute but if a case was presented objectively, logically, and firmly, he could eventually be persuaded to change his stance. However, he ran circles around those who were ill-prepared and did not know their stuff.

In many ways Professor Percival was a master of serendipity, using his natural ability to cope with or exploit the next situation which presented itself. Failure to build on the many foundations which he established seemed to be a personal characteristic, if not a flaw. This makes him sound like a butterfly flitting from flower to flower, but if he was, then he belonged to an unusual species, and visited many exotic

gardens. Once committed to a project he dropped everything else and threw all his own energy, and much of others, into seeing it through. He was so thorough that having completed the work, he seldom returned to extend or develop it, as this appeared to bore him. He was a genuine initiator rather than imitator and left much for others to develop.

Professor Percival thought that life was fun. He held strong views, not always in the direction of the prevailing wind, and never lost his forthright manner. He enjoyed challenges, ignored or stood aside from bureaucratic bungling, gave staunch and lifelong support to those who worked with him, and established an academic department with a genuine *esprit de corps*. Those who knew him realized that he could do almost anything that he set his mind to. At one time his knowledge of jade was unrivalled in Britain and he always knew a lot about antiques. By all accounts he was shrewd in his dealings on the stock exchange. The magnificent show of heaths, azaleas and rhododendrons at 'Woodcroft' are a tribute to his expertise and imaginative landscaping. He was an inveterate salmon fisher. To the end his intellect remained razor sharp and his enthusiasm never left him. Six months before he died he completed a remarkable 400 page text on 'Some aspects of the development of dermatology with special reference to the contribution of the Edinburgh Medical School' which will remain a monument to his erudition as well as to his love of the speciality and the University of Edinburgh. He was, without doubt, an outstanding man, and a luminary in British dermatology.

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