Alan Pollock

Alan Pollock died quietly and contentedly on 17 January 2006 at Scarborough General Hospital, where he had worked since 1958. His link with the British Association of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeons is that he and Mary Evans worked together as technical editors for the British Journal of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery. They were a team who provided invaluable support to a series of editors all of whom were immensely grateful for their advice and support. A week before his death Alan was correcting manuscripts and advising on appropriate statistical analysis. But this was only a small part of an eventful life. His main vocation was as a general surgeon to Scarborough General Hospital. He was also an effective medical research worker, a farmer and agricultural innovator; one of a rare breed of surgical polymaths.

Alan Pollock was born in Johannesburg on 10 September 1921. His family was part of the British establishment that developed South Africa before the war. His father was an accountant and secretary to Sir Herbert Robinson, an associate of Cecil Rhodes. As a boy he met Gandhi, who stayed with his family, and also on one occasion he met Jan Smuts after climbing Table Mountain and camping there for the night. Pollock’s intellectual ability was soon evident and reflected in the fact that he enrolled at Cape Town University at an indecently young age and received a B.Sc. at 15.

After completing his medical degree he undertook military service in the RSA Navy and was subsequently seconded to the RN. His tour of duty coincided with the War years and was spent in the Far East where, by all accounts, he enjoyed himself. This was helped by the fact that his friend’s father was Army Commander Southern India, which exposed him briefly to the fading splendour of the British Raj.

After the war Pollock was involved in a serious motorcycle accident in which he broke a leg, but recovered sufficiently to continue his medical training in England and was fortunate to hold a post with Sir Howard Florey at Oxford. Florey, probably more than Fleming, deserves recognition for first realising the potential of penicillin and then overcoming the formidable technical problems of producing the antibiotic in commercial quantities; for the latter he was dependent on American help. Mr Pollock entered an illustrious department of experimental pathology at the age of 25 and his first two research papers were published in Nature. It was at this time he married Hilary Grant, the daughter of the Professor of Music at Cape Town University. Despite the obvious career opportunities with Florey, Pollock decided he was not suited to experimental pathology and communicated the fact to Florey who replied ‘I do agree with you my boy, I will have a word with Professor Gardner (Medicine).’ He was rendered speechless when Pollock indicated he wanted to do surgery.

It was at this time that a friend of Pollock’s, who was houseman to Sir Stanford Cade at the Westminster, broke his leg playing rugby and Alan did his locum. This was his entry to surgery. On attending for duty he was asked which weekend off he would like in his six-month posting! Cade was the pre-eminent surgical oncologist of his generation and was one of the first surgeons to embrace the new discipline of radiotherapy in which he developed a particular interest in mouth cancer. The reason this discipline first fell to surgeons was that initially the only way of delivering radiation was by way of implants inserted into the body. The radioactive material was so valuable that it was then retrieved to be used again. Later Pollock moved to St Marks as RSO and worked with surgeons such as Norman Tanner, Henry Thompson, and Geoff Slaney. Subsequently he took a research fellowship in Baltimore and worked on porcine heart valves with Al Blalock. He made great friends with Vivian Thomas, Blalock’s chief assistant, and Alan is mentioned in his autobiography as a quiet and unassuming person. This role Alan assumed when in company, but he was a much more forceful individual when on his own territory.

On his return from the USA he moved to Leeds as senior lecturer to Professor Goligher. Later he moved to Scarborough where he continued to have an important role in training registrars from the Leeds rotation. This move was dictated by health reasons as he was afflicted by severe bronchitis and was advised to move to somewhere with cleaner air than Leeds. He set about addressing the problems that faced him in clinical practice, and adopted a methodological approach based on sound scientific principles. Together with his secretary Mary Evans, who had outgrown her typing duties, he embarked on a series of prospective randomised trials evaluating different antibiotics, their prophylactic use, bowel preparations, anaesthetic techniques, surgical incisions, methods of haemostasis, and suture materials. In the postoperative setting they assessed the effects of calf stimulation and pneumatic compression on deep venous thrombosis. This work, all the more remarkable in that it was undertaken in a district general hospital, led to 4 books and over 200 scientific publications. He was a founder member of the Surgical Infection Society of North America and became president of the European sister organisation. He was also its first Semmelweis lecturer. He was a keen supporter of the Royal Society of Medicine and president of its Section of Surgery at a time when this was a prized position.

His energy and inquisitive nature was not satiated by clinical work alone. A year after arriving in Scarborough, driving a 1937 Rolls Royce, he bought Murk Head, a farm of 170 acres, with the help of a generous overdraft. In 1963 he added 1 300 acres of moorland; it had been commandeered by the War Department and now had to be sold back, but the only bidder was the Forestry Commission who he knew would not bid over £5 an acre. He offered £6. There was the occasional downside to this purchase, for a year later his son Tom approached with something in his arms. It was a bomb and the disposal team blew it up at the site as it was too dangerous to move! After the bomb disposal team had done their work Tom said it was the best day of his whole life. The subsequent years were taken up with pioneering work in reclaiming moorland for grazing. The farm initially made a profit of £660 and although this had improved to £10 000 by
1991, his farm remained a labour of love. The Rolls Royce was sold in 1961 (£100) and never replaced with anything more lavish than a Citroen.

In the last year of his life Alan developed symptoms of dysphasia and was thought initially to have had a CVA. It transpired he had an evolving motor neuron disorder. He bore the news stoically and in typical fashion made preparation to minimise disruption as the disease progressed to its eventual conclusion. Alan Pollock had a personality that was difficult to characterise. He was most unassuming in company and utterly charming. But he was a man of principle and in his own domain either at work or on the farm he led with a firm but fair hand. He was gregarious, enjoyed his beer, and loved his pipe. The research meetings after the Tuesday afternoon operating list were always held in the pub where junior staff were instructed not to call him 'Sir' as he would answer only to Alan.

Alan is survived by his wife who suffered from early dementia and has been in a nursing home for 15 years, two sons (Simon and Tom) and a daughter (Harriet). Alan Pollock lived an eventful life to which he made a telling contribution. He will be missed by all who knew him. He came from an age of English gentlemen.

Mark McGurk

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Randolph Russel Human (Randy)

It is with great sadness that we record the death of Randolph (Randy) Human, who passed away on 13 January 2007. Randolph was born in Piketberg on 5 December 1936. He grew up in the Western Cape and went to the local school, where his father was the school principal. Following matriculation, it is a tribute to his intellect that he was accepted at the Medical School of the University of Cape Town, and was one of the few non-whites to enrol at that time. Following his graduation he spent a short spell in general practice in the Western Cape before returning to UCT to specialise in surgery under the then head of Department Professor J. H. Louw. He was based at Somerset Hospital. These were not easy years, having to contend with many issues related to the apartheid laws including unequal salaries. Notwithstanding, Randolph obtained the Fellowship of the College of Surgeons of South Africa in 1967 and was one the first persons of colour to obtain this qualification.

In 1969 he relocated to Durban and took an appointment at the then University of Natal and at King Edward VIII hospital. He entered private practice in Durban in 1974, but continued to hold a sessional post at the University and King Edward Hospital.

At that stage I relocated from Cape Town to Durban and was mandated to develop vascular surgery in the hospital environment. Without Randolph’s help, loyalty, hard work and co-operation my task would have been very difficult. Randolph gave selfless service to King Edward patients and was always willing to do extra work when asked. He was a superb technical surgeon and generations of trainees will attest to this. He was also an excellent teacher and was extremely popular, a true role model for all.

As younger surgeons graduated and entered into private practice, he relinquished some of his own paid hospital sessions in order to help them to get established. With the passage of time he was eventually virtually working pro deo at King Edward, but never gave less of his time, and was honoured by the University in 2005 for long and distinguished service.

Randy was a keen sportsman, an outstanding golfer and a star spin bowler in the surgery department cricket team. He enjoyed a party, and he and his wife Erna were the life and soul of many gatherings. Erna died in 2002. For those of us who knew Randy it was extremely sad to observe his slowly deteriorating health over the past three years, as he literally faded away. We all wish to remember him for what he was, a dynamic, good-humoured individual, superb in his craft but humble and giving of himself. He leaves a daughter and two sons. We offer our sincere condolences to his family.

Rest well, old friend – we miss you.

John Robbs