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Shaw, John

Qualifications: MB BS Syd (1965) PhD Syd (1975) MRACP (1968) FRACP (1974)

Born: 22/12/1940

Died: 14/8/1997

Biography:

John Shaw was born and brought up in Sydney. Following schooling at Strathfield Primary School and Burwood High School, he entered the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Sydney, graduating in 1965. He came from a non-medical background – his father was an engineer who moved into business management. John trained as a resident and then medical registrar at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, during this time foreshadowing his subsequent professional career as a foundation member of the hypertension clinic with David Tiller. In his fifth postgraduate year, as the recipient of a National Heart Foundation Research Fellowship, he joined Professor Paul Korner in the Hallstrom Institute of Cardiology, working on the control of cardiovascular function by the nervous system.

During his postdoctoral period, John Shaw worked first with Richard Ross at the Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore Maryland. During this period, he extended his understanding of and technical skill at experimental hæmodynamic studies. In 1973 he and his family moved to London where he worked for two years in the Medical Unit Laboratory at St Mary's Hospital under the direction of Professor Stan Peart. This marked a shift in research interest to mechanisms governing sodium excretion. Working with an idiosyncratic team of John Lennane from New Zealand and David Gordon from England, he concentrated on diagnostic techniques in primary hyperaldosteronism and the intriguing idea that there was a sensitive monitor for dietary sodium in the upper gut (subsequently confirmed).

In 1974, John returned to Australia and Melbourne to take up the position of clinical pharmacologist at Melbourne University and physician at the Royal Melbourne Hospital. By 1979 he was Director of Clinical Pharmacology and Therapeutics. Always a memorable educator, he began to explore opportunities to promote what later became known as quality use of medicines and was instrumental in developing and publishing the Victorian guidelines for antibiotic prescribing. Like many things he initiated, the guidelines turned out to be an idea whose time had come and have given rise to a publishing company, which now publishes prescribing support booklets in many therapeutic areas.

In 1979, he moved back to Sydney to take up the foundation Reckitt and Coleman Chair in Clinical Pharmacology at the University of Sydney. His professional development was now showing the characteristics that marked his career - overwhelming energy, strong skills in managing people, a

critical mind and a commitment to delivering the highest standards of health to the community. He was an outstanding teacher in the lecture hall and in small groups. Characteristically, his teaching techniques were considered, illuminated by published work and technically perfect. His slides conveyed one concept at a time, followed logically (punctuated with pungent excerpts from comic strips) and the associated talk was delivered virtually without his having to look at the screen. He bore the heaviest teaching load in his department.

At the same time, John rapidly established a vigorous research programme in his Department. Unlike much research in Sydney at this stage, this was based on extensive collaboration within the University and its associated teaching hospitals and at other institutions. Clinically, he worked principally at Concord Hospital but also at times at the Royal Prince Alfred and Royal North Shore Hospitals. His combination of interests led him before long to take an interest in the public health work of the National Heart Foundation where he was instrumental in developing education programmes for doctors, health workers and the public. During the twelve years he was at the University of Sydney, his energy and talents were acknowledged widely, with John being on the boards of the Royal North Shore Hospital and the University's Medical Foundation. He was consulting editor in therapeutics for the Medical Journal of Australia, served on the board of the Australian Medical Publishing Company and during 1988 and 1989 was its Chairman. Outside his professional life, he found time to become a director of the NSW Kindergarten Association.

John's high level of participation in all the fields that touched him was typical of him. He was committed to improving human life by every means available. Not surprisingly, such an approach to professional life made him popular with students and co-workers. He was outgoing and even tempered, expressed himself fluently and was prepared to sacrifice his own convenience to help others. Physically he was of medium height and slim build but a commanding presence in any room or any company. Although he possessed a quick wit, he was without malice and generous in his judgments of people. John and his wife Robin had four children in whose lives he was a central figure, in spite of a heavy travel commitment. He enthusiasm for travel remained unabated all his life, largely driven by his enthusiasm for scientific meetings and the complex levels of interaction he enjoyed with colleagues from all over the world. In spite of frequent absences, he seemed to be at home most Saturdays to ferry children to sport or music lessons and to do the grocery shopping with Robin.

In 1991, John was appointed Medical Director of the National Heart Foundation. His skills at networking and getting disparate people to work together came to the fore again. He now began to show another side to his protean personality – a strong sense of business and investment competence. By this time, he was on the advisory boards of several medical technology companies in Australia and overseas. His outstanding educational talents continued to be reflected in the quality and volume of the Foundation's educational material. In 1992, he was discovered to have giant cell lymphoma and shortly after left his Heart Foundation position.

For many years he had had a strong relationship with the pharmaceutical company Merck Sharp & Dohme. Their programmes in cardiovascular medical education had set new standards for industry-sponsored education in Australia. John was involved in their conception and very often in the events themselves. Although not yet severely affected by his illness, he

reduced his workload and worked as a consultant to the company on various educational and research projects. One of his last acts at the Heart Foundation was to begin work on the design of the LIPID study, a controlled trial of pravastatin in people with high blood cholesterol, which was one of the first to confirm the improvement in the incidence of coronary artery disease when serum cholesterol is reduced. In 1994, John's relationship with Merck Sharp & Dohme became official when he was appointed medical director.

In many ways, he was a purpose-built medical director. The skills in people management, critical analysis, networking and clinical trial design he had developed as an academic and at the National Heart Foundation made him instantly at home in the corporate environment. John was in charge of a disparate group responsible for conducting clinical trials, regulatory affairs, medico-legal review and information for doctors, pharmacists and the public on the company's products. In his three years as medical director, he created new standards for the role.

Throughout this time, John was progressively more severely affected by his illness. Typically, he immersed himself in the literature on it and to a large extent, supervised his own clinical management. His outcome was decided when a bone marrow transplant failed to function and he died of pulmonary infection on 14 August 1997. His memory is preserved in a named lecture by a distinguished visiting speaker at the annual Merck Sharp & Dohme cardiovascular symposium and a post-doctoral fellowship of the National Heart Foundation

Author: GJ MACDONALD

References: The Age 19 Sept 1997; Med J Aust 1997 167 489

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Revised July 2005