Professor James Mourilyan Tanner: 1920-2010

A tribute based on a eulogy written and read by Professor Noel Cameron from Loughborough University at his funeral at Exeter Crematorium on August 23rd, 2010, with some extracts from the funeral service conducted by Alison Orchard from the British Humanist Association:

An intelligent, well read and thoughtful man, scientific and global in outlook, James Tanner chose to reject what religion had to offer him. He had faith in life before death and believed in human endeavour, though, and, particularly through his unstinting work as an expert human auxologist of world renown, Professor Tanner left humanity better than he found it; there are many people, not here, whose lives have more quality because Jim lived.

I offer these comments and my personal reflections some 37 years after I first met Jim in 1973 in the Department of Growth and Development at London University’s Institute of Child Health.

Although that wasn’t the first time I had met James Tanner – like many of the people here today I first met him when I read “Growth at Adolescence” arguably Jim’s most significant contribution to our knowledge of the biology of human growth and development and specifically to the period of growth with which his name has become synonymous - adolescence.

Within the pages of “Growth at Adolescence” I was introduced to a subject of endless complexity and fascination by a scientist who wrote with eloquence and style, who conveyed enthusiasm and excitement, and who seemed to reach out from the pages of this book and take me with him on a journey of discovery that, for me, has still not finished. I have had it confirmed often over the last 4 decades that it was through the pages of Growth at Adolescence that many scientists were introduced to the biology of human growth and development and came to admire and revere the author, James Tanner.

The Department of growth and development at the Institute of Child Health was, by the early 1970s, a centre for research in human growth that was unequalled in the world. Whilst there were other centres and institutes in both Europe and America that focussed on human growth, none had the breadth and depth of research that was occurring within that department. Jim had attracted scientists working on a variety of research topics; the ethologist Nick Blurton-Jones researching mother-child interaction, the biochemist Pat Williams and his group working on the isolation and purification of the somatomedins (IGFs), Bill Marshall working with Lynn Ahmed and famous for this analysis of the variations in pubertal development, Phyllis Eveleth collating the global output of the IBP in terms of worldwide variations in human growth, Harvey Goldstein and Barry Carter, using a computer the size of a small semi-detached house, to develop programs to analyse time-series data, and a group of clinicians that included Charles Brooke, Martin Savage, Mike Preece, Catherine Law, Claire Burns, amongst many others who were seeing children with suspected growth disorders in the twice –weekly clinics at the Hospital for Sick Children, Great Ormond Street. And all supported by a team of support staff and secretaries led by Jan Baines.

And, central to this whole process, were Jim Tanner and Reg Whitehouse occupying interconnecting offices outside of which was the laboratory in which PhD students studied and in which visiting scientists from throughout the world learnt to measure and analyse the growth of children.

Tanner and Whitehouse collaborated for almost 40 years – their names are as synonymous to the study of human growth and development as “bacon and eggs” is to an English breakfast. Whilst Reg Whitehouse was the lead author on only one publication in those 40 years Jim maintained that Reg’s contribution was evident throughout all of their publications.

The department had resulted from Jim’s decision to make the study of human growth and development the central research theme of his academic life. The Department was an exciting and vibrant atmosphere in which to work and at times hilarious and dangerous.

He was born in Camberley Surry to a military family on 1st August 1920, educated at Wellington School, and by the early years of the War he was studying medicine at St Mary’s in London. There was a scheme to send senior medical students abroad to finish their medical training away from the rigours of wartime London, and Jim was sent to the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia – a university and city for which (unlike WC Fields) he retained a lifelong affection and attachment.

Returning to the UK he was appointed in 1946 as a demonstrator in Wilfred Le Gros Clarke’s Department of Anatomy in Oxford. There he teamed up with Jo Weiner and Derek Roberts with whom he was later to develop the subject of Human Biology, but in 1946, Le Gros Clarke requested that Jim Tanner give a course of 6 lectures on human growth to the medical students.

Finding a dearth of information in the UK he successfully obtained a Viking Trust (now Wenner-Gren Foundation) travelling fellowship to visit the American growth studies at Harvard, Berkeley, Cleveland, and the Fels study in Yellow Springs and returned with a desire to start a British longitudinal growth study. By 1948 he was a lecturer in Physiology at the Sherrington School and following a presentation on his travels to the Royal Society, and a fortuitous meeting with a Dr. Bransby who was in the audience and had spent the war years using a National Children’s home in Harpenden to develop appropriate rationing levels for children, Jim’s Harpenden Longitudinal Growth Study started in 1949 and was to continue for the next 25 years.

The Harpenden study became the core research project of Jim’s career, it formed the dataset on which many of his most significant contributions were based and continues to be a model for those wishing to develop a longitudinal study of human growth and development.

During an academic and research career covering 7 decades and over 300 publications Jim became recognised as the world’s foremost authority on human growth and development or “auxology” as he coined the term for the study of human growth.

He was a founding member of the Society for the Study of Human Biology, co- editor (with Gabriel Laser) of its first journal “Human Biology” in the USA from 1963 to 1973, and subsequently founding editor of the Annals of Human Biology from 1974 onwards in the UK. He was the founding member and spirit behind the International Association of Human Auxology which continues to meet every 3 years and attract scientists from throughout the world.

Jim’s contribution to our knowledge of the biology of human growth covers virtually the whole of normal growth and its variation, but particularly adolescence and puberty, the development and use of growth charts, the assessment of skeletal maturity and the prediction of adult height. Also, and extremely topical as we approach 2012, Jim’s book “The physique of the Olympic athlete”, based on the Olympians of the Rome Olympics, is viewed as the classic text in that field.

I’m sure our clinical colleagues would agree that the he also made fundamental contributions to the clinical assessment and diagnosis of growth disorders, he pioneered the treatment of children with growth hormone deficiency, and the growth disorder clinics formed an educational centre for clinicians from throughout the world in which to study the diagnosis and treatment of growth disorders.

Gently charismatic in nature, Jim was an academic and teacher with a huge international following.

Jim also loved music, even considering becoming a professional musician as a younger man, and for many years he sang in Choral Societies in London. He enjoyed the theatre and would often travel to London for concerts and plays and with a lively appreciation of art, a number of artists became close personal friends.

But, also inclined to be a little shy, he was a man who loved to spend time at home, perhaps reading historical or scientific tomes and listening to the music that never failed to move him or perhaps in his garden, tending trees and shrubs or building ponds. Always a keen sportsman, he enjoyed watching rugby on the television and loved to ski. Latterly playing golf, he was an enthusiastic member of the club at Oake Manor in Taunton.

During his time in Philadelphia in the War, Jim married Bernice who became a General Practitioner when they settled back in England and they had two children, Helen and David, followed by three granddaughters, Mary, Sarah and Julia. Sadly, shortly after Bernice retired, a long illness overtook her and James nursed her until she died in 1991. He married again; this time to Gunilla, a former student of his. Theirs was a solid and supportive marriage, Gunilla adored Jim, and her children, Fredrick and Katarina, came to admire him greatly. Indeed, his family admired him as much as they loved him.

With the news of Jim’s death messages of sorrow and condolences started to arrive in my computer in-box. One came from a current PhD student who said that it may be corny but it was also true that a little of Jim Tanner continues to live in all of those who study human growth and development. I thought that to be an appropriate accolade for a scientist and teacher that his (or her) work continues to inform generation after generation of students and is thus a living memorial to a life well spent.

Whilst we are all sad at the loss of Jim Tanner we should also, I think, feel privileged to have had our lives enriched by our association with him.