

William Bryan Jennett (1926-2008)

S R Dharker M Ch

Professor Emeritus

SMS Medical College & Hospitals, Jaipur (Rajasthan)



Professor Bryan Jennett was born in Twickenham, Middlesex on March 1, 1926 and was evacuated during the second world war to rural Scotland. He attended King George V school in Southport and his intellect and leadership emerged at Liverpool Medical School, where he topped in his class in 1949 and became president of the National British Medical Students Association. He was trained at Oxford with Sir Hugh Cairns and at the RAMC Military Hospital, Wheatley where his lifelong devotion to the treatment of head injuries was kindled, and then at Cardiff, Manchester and finally at UCLA in Los Angeles as a Rockefeller Fellow with Horace Magoum. He was a lecturer in Neurosurgery at Manchester from 1957 to 1962. The prodigious and dexterous young surgeon was drawn to Neurosurgery after attending the lecture of Henry Cohen, 1st Baron Cohen of Birkenhead and he went on to take posts at Oxford, Cardiff and Manchester as well as a spell in the Royal Army Medical Corps.

He was appointed to an NHS/university consultant post in Glasgow in 1963, the new department unit which first operated from a converted wartime complex in the village of Killearn, and then at the Institute of Neurological Sciences in Glasgow where Jennett was allowed to combine clinical work with laboratory research. In 1968, a new chair of neurosurgery was established at Glasgow University to which he was appointed. In a remarkably short time Jennett made Glasgow a world class center of excellence in Neurosurgery which became the intellectual home for many academic neurosurgeons from home and abroad. He inspired young people, enthusiastically promoting

their careers, and most UK professors in Neurosurgery were trained in Glasgow. Bryan Jennett transformed the care of head injury patients, giving new hope to patients with previously little understood problems.

In 1972, with Fred Plum, a neurologist from New York, he described the Vegetative State – awake but not aware. In 1974, with Professor Graham Teasdale, he devised and validated the Glasgow Coma Scale (GCS) to describe the depth of coma. In 1975, with Michael Bond, he published the deceptively simple Glasgow Outcome Scale. He published seminal work on Epilepsy in 1962. His books “Introduction to Neurosurgery” (five editions from 1964 to 1995), “Management of Head Injuries” (1981) and most recently “The Vegetative State: medical facts, ethical and legal dilemmas” (2002) were hugely influential internationally. Organ donation procedures evolved, thanks in large part to Professor Jennett’s advocacy of brain death criteria for timely removal of cadaver organs.

He was Dean of Medicine at Glasgow University from 1981-86 and subsequently president of the section of Clinical Neurosciences at the Royal Society of Medicine in 1986, president of Headway, the national head injury patients group from 1988-1995. He received honorary DSC from the university of St. Andrews in 1993. Following his retirement in 1991 he was appointed CBE in 1992 and his work has continued to be globally celebrated. In the year 2007 he was the first recipient of the Medal of the Society of British Neurological Surgeons. He was Hunterian professor of the Royal College of Surgeons in 1962.

Sir Graham Teasdale, who later succeeded him as professor and head of department, described Professor Jennett as possibly the major figure in academic neurosurgery from the mid 1960s over two decades. He further described that Prof. Jennett had a talent for forging partnerships, and for attracting talented people to work for him and was very supportive in helping to develop their careers.

He breathed his last on January 26, 2008 in Glasgow, Scotland. He is survived by his wife Sheila, a noted professor of respiratory physiology, three sons and a daughter.

Address for correspondence:

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