



Alan Gibson (1951-2021)

Alan Gibson, who died on the 13<sup>th</sup> September 2021, spent his academic career at Chelsea College and subsequently King's College London following their merger in 1985. He was Head of the Department of Pharmacology at King's from 2003 until his retirement in 2009. He became a member of the British Pharmacological Society in 1975, was awarded the Rang prize in 2009 and became an Honorary Fellow of the Society in 2010.

Alan was born in the east end of Glasgow and was a "Hutchie boy", attending Hutcheson's Grammar school. During his teens he was a talented athlete, coached by the renowned and formidable, Alex Naylor, and he was one of the best 800 metres runners in the UK in his age group. Although a keen sports fan throughout his life – his PowerPoint colour scheme based on the claret and amber of Motherwell FC graced many a pharmacology lecture at King's – Alan's interest in athletics waned when he went to the University of Glasgow to study pharmacology, arriving shortly after John Gillespie, then Head of Department, had identified the rat anococcygeus muscle. Understanding the pharmacology and physiology of this intriguing muscle was to be the bedrock of Alan's academic career and he started early, publishing a paper with John Gillespie in the British Journal of Pharmacology in 1973, which Alistair Corbett – who studied at Glasgow a few years after Alan – feels was likely based on Alan's honours project.

Alan stayed at Glasgow - and with the anococcygeus - for his PhD with David Pollock, graduating in 1975 following completion of a thesis entitled "Drug-induced supersensitivity in the rat anococcygeus muscle". Alan's PhD work resulted in six full papers, including four in the British Journal of Pharmacology, and he was soon heading south with his wife Aileen, to take up a lectureship at Chelsea College in September 1975. He continued to work on the rat anococcygeus but eventually decided he needed more of a challenge and moved on to the mouse muscle! Tricky to find and even more tricky to string up in an organ bath, this tiny but intriguingly powerful little muscle – weighing a couple of milligrams it can pull tension of 100 times that amount – was to provide Alan with a rich source of

pharmacological questions that he went about answering in ever greater detail, starting in the early 1980s with an initial description of its properties by his PhD student Caroline Wedmore and ending shortly before his retirement when he was investigating Rho-kinase mediated calcium sensitisation mechanisms. As in the rat muscle, the main inhibitory neurotransmitter in the mouse anococcygeus proved to be nitric oxide, and Alan and a wealth of co-workers over the years including Phil Moore, John Tucker, Adrian Hobbs, Elliot Lilley and Chris Wayman, were able to use this preparation to dissect in great detail the physiology and pharmacology of the nitrergic synapse.

Underpinning all this work was Alan's meticulous approach to experiment design and analysis, and this was something he brought into his teaching. He was an excellent university teacher and liked nothing better than to be working with undergraduate students in the lab., pushing them to explain what they were doing, why they were doing it or what their results meant. The smile on Alan's face as he walked around the lab contrasted with that on the face of the students as they realised he was walking towards them! But he was never unkind or condescending, instead guiding students to the answers with immense patience and good humour.

On becoming Head of Department Alan set about strengthening the educational links between the department and the pharmaceutical industry, something that resulted in one of the first MSc programmes in Drug Discovery in the UK. He also led a successful bid to become an IMB Centre, with the aim of addressing the *in vivo* skills gap and King's has continued to build on that legacy and remains a renowned centre for the teaching of integrative pharmacology. His reputation for diligence, fairness and thoughtfulness led to Alan being asked to take on several senior academic administrative positions within King's including leading on aspects of the merger with the United Medical & Dental Schools in 1998. He was a hugely respected colleague and a skilful negotiator, to the extent that even those who disagreed with his decisions respected his judgement and could never argue that they hadn't had a fair hearing or that their points had not been given serious consideration. He was awarded the Fellowship of King's College London in 2009 in recognition of his contribution the life of the College.

Alan took early retirement in 2009 and whilst his colleagues lamented his leaving at a time when he still had much to offer it was absolutely the right decision for Alan, even more so when viewed in the cruel light of his untimely death. He followed the example of his mentor John Gillespie and rarely visited the department after his retirement, allowing his successor Sue Brain to get on with cementing her leadership. Alan instead chose to spend his time enjoying the company of friends and family and travelling the world with Aileen.

Alan is survived by his wife Aileen, three sons Daniel, David and Andrew and three grandchildren.

Ian McFadzean

King's College London