

A Tribute to J. D. Strahan (Dermot) by Professor Gareth Griffiths

Dermot was born on 24/2/33 and grew up in East Belfast. He was educated at Campbell College, before he went on to study Dentistry at Queen's University Belfast graduating in 1956. He worked as a GDP for a while and moved to England in 1960 where he soon joined another Belfast man in Stanley Alldritt, at the department of Periodontology in the Eastman Dental Hospital. Shortly afterwards Stanley moved back to Belfast to take up a Chair at Queen's University and Dermot became Acting Head of Periodontology and then subsequently became the permanent Head of the Department of Periodontology, a post he held until he retired from the academic side of his job. This put him into a staged retirement, but he retained his NHS post for a number of years. During this time he was responsible for bringing hygiene training to the Eastman, when the Hygiene training at the Royal ceased and further expanded the programme when the Dental School at UCLH closed. He finally retired to spend time with Anne and his beloved golf course.

You could not fail to be impressed with Dermot's smooth running of the Periodontology Department, particularly with the eclectic group of senior staff he had working with him over many years. I'm sure this was in no small measure due to his excellent interpersonal and administrative skills. For many years he organised and ran a wide range of postgraduate programmes, including a 1-year MSc in Periodontology, short courses for GDPs and service personnel. The clinical department was very efficient, although he put this down to our wonderful receptionist Doreen, who he maintained was the key member of the team. We worked well together with other departments especially Prosthetic and Conservative Dentistry as it was in those days. Dermot's clinical acumen and experience was fantastic. I have never seen such an impressive slide collection, both in terms of its content and organisation, but also the cabinetry that housed it. He was always keen to let you have access to it, which was invaluable as a new lecturer with very little material of your own. We talk today of patient centred treatment, and offering all treatment options, but one of Dermot's mantras was that when making a treatment plan we should strongly consider the patient's needs and means to follow it and not the pool you want to build in your back yard!

We have just celebrated 70 years of the British Society of Periodontology (BSP) and Dermot was involved during the early 60s, seen as a young man photographed with more senior luminaries such as Sir Wilfred Fish, George Cross and Ron Emslie. Dermot and other colleagues graduating from the 50s did so much to bring UK Periodontology to the fore as a clinical dental specialty. Like many my first awareness of him was through his contributions to textbooks and I remember being in awe at my first BSP meeting of seeing the people who had written the books I studied as an undergraduate. He undertook various roles within the BSP culminating in his time as President in 1975-1976.

Dermot was a man of great tact and diplomacy, highly respected by colleagues not just in Dentistry, but in wider medical and surgical circles. He used these talents wisely and modestly and was a central figure in the strategic development of the Eastman through the thirty years of his tenure as a senior member of staff. His talents were also much valued by the Royal College of Surgeons of England where he was a member of the Board of the Faculty of Dental Surgery for twelve years including a period as Vice-Dean.

My first direct contact with Dermot, was when I was interviewed for the Registrar job in Periodontology at the Eastman in 1983. I was successful and received the first of many bits of advice from Dermot. I was moving from Cardiff and he gave me advice on buying property in London. "Islington is up and coming" he said. When I went property hunting I found Islington had already up and come as far as I was concerned. The other bits of advice were much more profitable and the overriding comments from people I have asked about their memories and reflections on Dermot are what good advice, support or wise counsel people received from him. "He played a formative role in my career and what a true gentleman" are comments which are echoed by many. He was excellent with all of our students, but was particularly helpful to our overseas students, many of whom were in the UK for the first time. His lessons on British behaviour included the volume one should speak at and the use of adjectives to describe things, rather than expansive gesticulation. He had a wonderful sense of humour and was a delight to sit next to at a dinner or over lunchtime. If you did his Friday morning clinic he was always in a good mood, but you had to be particularly sharp as he was keen it finished on time so you could get to the old canteen - he used look forward to "fish and chips on a Friday". For years he travelled to the Eastman by train from Harpenden. He recounted an evening when all those who had season tickets to travel to St Pancras were invited for drinks in Harpenden by British Rail. The attendees were very anxious because they believed this was the first step towards a significant hike in the price of their season tickets. When Dermot was asked how much could British Rail increase the price of his season ticket before he would stop using the train he replied '2p'. Dermot loved golf and from an early age was a member of Knock golf club which was close to his childhood home in Belfast. He was a long-term supporter of the Eastman golf outings and even had a hole-in-one when playing with one of the Belfast "Eastman" dentists (Paddy McCullagh) incidentally also a member of Knock GC.

Dermot was a true gentleman and he will be sadly missed by all those who had the good fortune to work with him.