



Alan Johnson - Obituary

Most of our teachers were respected, and many were admired, but only a few were loved. I came to love Alan, because he gave me the greatest gift; integrating my medical practice into a framework of Christian morality. He taught me the expected surgical skills, but he was inspiring in a different way. He combined excellence in science, and the craft of surgery, with actually practising the moral life. After studying under him, I wanted to be like him. I wanted to be a good doctor, not only in a technical sense, but to be clean, decent, saintly, loving, Christ-like.

This tribute from one of Alan Johnson's former trainees sums up beautifully an academic surgeon, who managed to integrate excellence in clinical work, teaching and research with a gift for getting alongside individuals from all walks of life and making them feel valued and important.

Alan Godfrey Johnson was born at home in Epsom Downs in 1938. His father Douglas (affectionately known as 'DJ') was founder secretary of the Inter-Varsity Fellowship (IVF) and later became the first General Secretary of CMF. At the time of his death Alan was himself CMF President and also a past CMF chairman, and was from 1992 to 2004 chairman of ICMDA, the International Christian Medical and Dental Association, and later the ICMDA Trust, during which time that worldwide movement grew from 26 to over 50 national Christian doctors' organisations. Alan was a frequent speaker at ICMDA conferences and member country national conferences, particularly on medical ethical subjects. Students the world over will remember his legendary addresses on managing time and money which began with the words, 'Hitler and mother Theresa each had 24 hours in every day – they just used them differently'.

Alan was educated at Epsom College and studied medicine at Trinity College, Cambridge and University College Hospital (UCH), London. After training in general surgery at UCH and Charing Cross, under surgical giants such as Harding Raines and Norman Tanner, he was appointed Senior Lecturer and later Reader at Charing Cross before moving to Sheffield in 1979 to take up the post of Professor of Surgery which he held until his retirement in 2003.

He became a world authority on gastric motility and aspects of biliary and upper gastrointestinal surgery, pioneered sclerotherapy for oesophageal varices and highly selective vagotomy for peptic ulcer, and was an authority on bile duct reconstruction. He discovered new aspects of gastric motility, including the roles of the hormone cholecystokinin and the stomach pacemaker, and aspects of bile reflux.

His randomised clinical trial comparing the removal of the gall bladder by either laparoscopy or open surgery was heralded by the *Lancet* as 'a new gold standard for surgical trials'. He was widely respected for other work on evidence-based surgery including a trial on lithotripsy for gallstones on behalf of the Department of Health. More recently he championed the introduction of surgical services

for obesity in the UK and was Past President of the British Obesity Surgery Society.

Alan Johnson was a prolific academic author writing or editing ten books, over 30 book chapters and more than 200 articles and papers in peer-reviewed journals. As an international speaker on areas of gastrointestinal surgery, he was in demand as a lecturer in all five continents and in over 20 countries worldwide.

His many appointments included Chairman of the Specialist Advisory Committee in General Surgery (1991-1994), President of the Association of Surgeons of Great Britain and Ireland (1993-1994), and Chairman of the Specialist Medical Advisory Committee at the Department of Health (SMAC) (1998-2002).

Throughout his career Alan maintained a strong interest in medical ethics, and his third book on the subject, *Making Sense of Medical Ethics*, jointly written with his son Paul, himself a paediatric surgeon, has just been published posthumously. Alan Johnson had actively opposed the legalisation of euthanasia and in 2004 gave expert evidence to the House of Lords' Select Committee on Lord Joffe's *Assisted Dying for the Terminally Ill Bill*, which was defeated in the House of Lords in May 2006. At the same time he had actively promoted good palliative care as an essential alternative to euthanasia, and had recently co-edited a book on surgical palliative care, currently in press.

Alan also made time for a range of interests outside medicine and was talented in many areas. His hobbies included ornithology, painting, music (he played organ and piano), sport (particularly cricket), and more recently woodcarving.

Despite his rigorous clinical, academic and speaking commitments Alan deliberately made lifestyle choices that gave priority to his family and he constantly acknowledged that his wife Esther had been integral to any success he had had.

It was perhaps fitting that Alan should die on St Luke's Day in the churchyard of a small parish church, St John's Wotton in Broadmoor, having just preached on 'Christian compassion in medicine' at a sister church and about to preach again – a man who was equally home on the international stage and the hospital shop floor – going about his master's business, in a very humble setting. Amongst the many quotations that he used and loved (he kept pages and pages of quotations in his diary) was the quote, 'There is no end to what you can achieve if you don't mind who gets the credit'.

During a routine medical check-up two weeks before he died, his doctor jokingly said that Johnson was so fit 'he would live forever'. His reply was typical, 'I am going to live forever, but not in this life!'

Alan is survived by his wife, Esther, and his three children Paul, Andrew and Fyona.

Alan Johnson, Emeritus Professor of Surgery in Sheffield, was born on January 19, 1938. He died on October 15, 2006, aged 68.

Peter Saunders is CMF General Secretary