

James Ellsworth Laing MB Edin. FRCSE

Jim Laing was one of the UK's leading Burns Surgeons, having developed the Wessex Regional Burns Unit at Odstock in Salisbury. He was appointed Consultant there in 1954, and after a training that included time at Mount Vernon and with Sir Archibald McIndoe, he quickly acquired a reputation as a passionate advocate for patients with burns who came under his care. With his colleague John Barron, he established Odstock as a world class training centre for burns and plastic surgery and a long list of international trainees spent time in Odstock before going back to become leaders in their own countries.



The constant search to improve the care provided to burns patients and to learn from the experience of others was an important motivator for him. Close friendships with Michael Tempest in Wales and Douglas Jackson in Birmingham, as well as with many international colleagues, created opportunities for sharing knowledge and ideas and he helped found the BBA at a meeting of Burns Surgeons in Salisbury in 1968. He held leadership roles in the BBA, EBA and the ISBI for many years, helping to improve the standards of burn care around the world through education, and recognising that the burden of burn injury is in low and middle income countries.

In 1967 he helped design one of the very first purpose built burns units in the world with individual rooms, hands free lavatories and telephones to make it easier for patients to have some independence. He recognised the importance of the environment to recovery and patient rooms were orientated to have views out across the Wiltshire countryside. Opportunities for patients to socialise and integrate with others as they recovered were also a feature of the design.

A keen campaigner for burns prevention, he would often say that he would like to make himself redundant! He lobbied for changes in regulations to open fires, flammable children's nightdresses, kettle flexes and electric radiant bar fires: a regular source of devastating hand



burns in crawling babies. With film maker and now author, Graham Hurley, he made powerful burns prevention films for both public showing (ITV) and also for use by the charity Project Icarus, in communities at high risk of scalds and flame burns.

He was very aware that there remained much to understand about the nature of burn injury, the physiological response to it and how best to optimise a patient's management. With scientist Dr. Dan Davies he raised external funds to create the Odstock Burns Research Laboratory and on Dan's retirement this was developed further by Dr. Peter Shakespeare as it's Director. Finding no convenient outlet for burns literature he established the journal "Burns" and was it's executive editor for many years. He would be delighted that young Plastic Surgeons continue to collaborate with scientists from other disciplines to understand the burn injury and how to treat it and to publish their findings.

Jim Laing died, from a primary brain tumour in 1983, shortly before he was due to retire and the Laing Essay prize was created by the BBA in his memory. He would be very honoured that the importance that he placed upon burn prevention, education, research and treatment are reflected in this prize and that others have continued to pursue these aims.

Hamish Laing

Consultant Plastic Surgeon, ABM University Health Board

Swansea August 2011

Illustrations:

1. James Ellsworth Laing
2. Jim Laing with some paediatric patients