

## **RICHARD STUART ATKINSON OBE - AN APPRECIATION**

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Richard (Dick) Stuart Atkinson, Honorary Consultant Anaesthetist Southend-on-Sea Hospital, and former Vice Dean of the Faculty of Anaesthetists, died unexpectedly at his home on 3 January 2000. He was a member of the first Council of the History of Anaesthesia Society (HAS) and was its President from 1996 to 1998. He was appointed an Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) for his services to medicine in 1990.

Dick Atkinson was my close friend and confidant. We were both brought up in Yorkshire from an early age and were educated at rival Yorkshire independent public schools. We shared a love of that county and its wholesome plain cooking undisguised by haute cuisine! I was two years senior to Dick, but our careers ran on remarkably parallel lines. Both of us had the good fortune early in our specialist careers to come under the influence of the legendary J Alfred Lee of Southend-on-Sea Hospital, who was later to be the first President of HAS. In 1957 I was a Senior Registrar in the Southend Department of which Lee was Chairman, and Dick joined it as a young Consultant in 1961.

Richard Atkinson was born at Doncaster on 18 July 1927. He was the eldest of the three children of Stuart Atkinson, Professor of Mining Engineering at the University of Leeds and later of the University of Sheffield. Dick had a particularly close relationship with his father who frequently took him to watch the first-class cricket matches at Headingley. Dick consequently developed a true Yorkshireman's lifelong interest in cricket, and he became a member of both the Yorkshire Cricket Club and the Marylebone Cricket Club.

He was educated at Leeds Grammar School, Trinity Hall Cambridge, and St Bartholomew's Hospital (Barts), obtaining his Cambridge medical degree in 1951. The compulsory pre-registration year had not been introduced at that time and Dick began training in his chosen specialty of anaesthesia after six months as a House Physician at the North Middlesex Hospital. He then became a House Officer Anaesthetist at Barts, and subsequently a Senior House Officer at the Prince of Wales Hospital, North London.

Dick Atkinson was called up for National Service in the Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC) in September 1953. He served first at the Cambridge Military Hospital in Aldershot. There, by dint of hard study, he passed the very first final examination for the Fellowship of the Faculty of Anaesthetists (FFARCS) in November 1953. This was immediately after the qualification had been upgraded from the interim two-part Diploma in Anaesthetics (DA) to the status of a Fellowship. Dick was then posted to the British Military Hospital in Rinteln Germany as a Specialist. There, like others of his generation, he bore responsibility beyond what might have been expected of one of his previous experience and training, in an RAMC depleted of senior specialists in all disciplines following demobilisation after the Second World War.

Dick returned to the civilian National Health Service (NHS) in 1955 for further training in the Registrar grades. His Senior Registrar rotation was based on Barts. It included one year at Chase Farm District Hospital at Enfield and a year seconded as a Fellow in Anesthesiology at

the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. That Department of Anesthesia was headed by the renowned Professor Robert Dripps. Dick always acknowledged that he learnt a great deal during that year, particularly in the field of local and spinal anaesthesia, concerning which, also influenced by Alfred Lee, he later became an authority. Such were the differences in British and American clinical practice at that time that Dick was able to reciprocate by making several important contributions to the work of the Philadelphia department. This was particularly by promoting British techniques of using muscle relaxant drugs. He also introduced his American colleagues to the use of trichloroethylene, a useful agent favoured by British anaesthetists, and by Dick in particular, both before and after halothane was introduced in 1956, for specific indications including neurosurgery. He wrote a review article on trichloroethylene for the journal *Anesthesiology* and was one of many anaesthetists who deeply regretted the final withdrawal of trichloroethylene by the manufacturers in 1984 purely for economic reasons.

On completing his apprenticeship training Dick was appointed to Southend-on-Sea as a Consultant in 1961. Alfred Lee chaired a department and ran a school of anaesthesia at Southend in a NHS District General Hospital, which, in organisation and postgraduate training methods, as well as care for the welfare of trainees, surpassed many university hospital departments of the period. A considerable number of senior British anaesthetists, as well as many practitioners from overseas, recall with gratitude time spent at Southend during their training. Alfred taught me personally much clinical anaesthesia when I was with him in 1957, but he also went out of his way to prepare me for becoming a Consultant. Dick often told me how carefully and tactfully Alfred Lee guided him when he was first appointed at Southend, and from whom he too learnt a great deal. Dick paid tribute to Lee's skill and kindness in a paper read to the HAS in 1998. (*Proceedings of the History of Anaesthesia Society* 1998, 23:10-15)

Dick Atkinson collaborated closely with Lee professionally and they became firm personal friends. He also joined Lee as co-author of that classic textbook *A Synopsis of Anaesthesia* from the fifth (1964) to the tenth (1987) edition, and the eleventh edition was published in 1993 after Lee's death, as *Lee's Synopsis of Anaesthesia*, with Dick as the senior of the three authors. Dick also collaborated with Langton Hewer in producing the twelfth (1976) to the eighteenth (1993) editions of *Recent Advances in Anaesthesia and Analgesia*, and with Professor Sir Robert Macintosh for the fourth (1978) and the fifth (1985) editions of *Lumbar Puncture and Spinal Analgesia*. Dick was also co-author of *A Handbook of Intensive Care* (1981) and of *A Short History of Anaesthesia* (1996), and author of a monograph on James Young Simpson, the discoverer of chloroform (1973).

He and I were co-editors of *The Proceedings of the Second International Symposium on the History of Anaesthesia* (1987). We enjoyed a long and happy association with the journal *Anaesthesia* from 1973 to 1987, first as Editor and Senior Assistant Editor, and later as joint Advisory Editors. Dick was also an Associate Editor of the *Annals of the Royal College of Surgeons of England* from 1986 to 1990.

Richard Atkinson was a Member of the Board of the Faculty of Anaesthetists from 1975 to 1988 and he was Vice Dean of the Faculty and a Member of the Council of the Royal College of Surgeons of England from 1985 to 1987. He continued as Member of Council until 1990 after the Faculty achieved collegiate status within the surgeons' College in 1988. Dick contributed a great deal during that period. He and I aspired to present the views of the staff

of ordinary NHS District General Hospitals in a Board largely composed of academic anaesthetists and consultants from university hospitals. Dick had the ability to see both sides of a problem and then, after careful analysis, to present his considered opinion quietly and politely, but nonetheless forcefully. I recollect, for example, that it was he who, not without opposition from some more senior members of the Board, initiated the concept of the need for appointing Faculty Tutors in every hospital group, and for them to meet annually in conference. He and I did not agree in the nineteen eighties about the question of whether there was a pressing need for the inauguration of a truly independent (Royal) College of Anaesthetists. I was quixotically fired with enthusiasm, but Dick took a calmer and more cautious view. This did not impair our personal friendship however!

Dick Atkinson held office in several national organisations besides the Faculty and the College of Anaesthetists. He was in his time President of the Section of Anaesthesia of the Royal Society of Medicine and Vice President of the Association of Anaesthetists of Great Britain and Ireland. He was awarded both the John Snow Medal of the Association and the College Medal, and was an Honorary Member of the Association. Both Alfred Lee and Dick Atkinson had an interest in the study of the history of anaesthesia well before they came together, and this interest was further stimulated by their collaboration. Dick gave sage advice to HAS in its early days as a Member of its first Council. He also organised two successful meetings of the Society at Southend, (one during the presidency of Alfred Lee in 1988, and the other at the end of his own term as President in 1998). Although an author rather than a speaker, he competently delivered several interesting papers to HAS over the years.

Despite his many commitments, Dick Atkinson did not neglect his duties at his base hospital at Southend. He was at various times, in addition to his clinical duties, Postgraduate Tutor, a Member of the District Health Authority and Chairman of the District Ethical Committee, as well as a member of several other committees.

Dick was outstandingly supportive of the ideals of patient care embodied in the original concept of the British National Health Service. It was therefore sad that he was deeply concerned in recent years by what he perceived as the increased bureaucracy and the deterioration of NHS hospital services that followed the various reorganisations of the last four decades, despite the dedication of the clinical medical and nursing staff. He told me on a number of occasions that he dated the decline of the hospital services from the implementation of the 1968 Salmon Report on Nurse Staffing Structure that seemed to put management and sociology above patient care in a caring profession. This was not surprising. Both Dick and I had had the privilege and advantage of marrying nurses who had qualified in their profession long before 1968. This was in an era when marriage was still a partnership not regarded as being dependent, either economically or culturally, on two incomes. In those days too, whole time care of one's own young children and the management of the home was not considered to be a secondary occupation.

Richard Atkinson was a popular and respected figure. He had a kindly and equable temperament and a special regard for the welfare of his junior staff. He was sympathetic and respectful of the views of those who held opinions contrary to his own, but he was capable of taking firm decisions, based on his own assessment, when it was necessary.

It is some consolation that he had virtually completed his life's work when he died, having handed over his professional and literary responsibilities to others. He greatly enjoyed

domestic family life in retirement, but he nonetheless continued to be a frequent attender at scientific meetings, not least those of the History of Anaesthesia Society. There is no doubt that Richard Atkinson is greatly missed wherever anaesthetists and medical historians forgather.

Dick was a lover of music and opera. He especially enjoyed visits to Glyndbourne and Bayreuth, often in the company of Alfred Lee and their respective wives. He and I shared a Christian belief although we rarely discussed it.

Dick married Veronica Filler, then a junior operating theatre sister at Bart's, in 1954 during his military service. She was thereafter his lifelong affectionate companion. Dick was a devoted family man. His wife, four children and eleven grandchildren survive him. They have our deepest sympathy for their loss, but they will be comforted by the knowledge of his outstanding contributions to his profession and to the wellbeing of all who knew him.