

ELIZABETH TESSA HEDLEY-WHYTE

Mr Chancellor,

Imagine a smoke-filled London in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In those days a Rolls-Royce was an integral part of the medical “uniform”. That is, apart from my forebears in Neurology, whom I understand insisted on a Bentley. (This was because the Bentley key was more suited to tickling the sole of the foot, whilst eliciting the Babinski reflex on the ward round.)

Now, around that time a fifth year medical student sat behind the chauffeur in a Roller, next to a well-known forensic pathologist. They drove between West London mortuaries carrying out post-mortems on suspicious cases, accompanied by a secretary who typed up reports on the spot, with crisp carbon copies. This was an influential time for the soon-to-be Dr Elizabeth Tessa Hedley-Whyte, who was so taken by the experience that she chose a career in pathology. Mr Chancellor, the Rolls-Royce was not the attraction – rather it was a fascination with human pathology which continues to this day.

From 12 years of age, Tessa was destined for a career in medicine. Living in Newcastle, she attended Church High School, followed by a small private school in Sevenoaks, but unfortunately, being a school for girls, appropriate A-level courses for an aspiring medic were simply not on offer. The

1948 National Health Act stipulated that only 10% of medical school places could be offered to women. What a contrast to the current situation where up to 70% of UK medical graduates are female.

But at that time, special arrangements had to be made for Tessa to attend the local boy's school. This must have stood her in good stead, and on an equal footing with her peers, for her future profession remained heavily dominated by men.

Tessa passed her 4 A-levels, and began her studies at King's College a short walk up the road from here. In her third year she was exposed to pickled body parts and microscope slides which remain her focus of interest. When she passed her "third M.B." she became engaged to John Hedley-Whyte, and completed the final 2 years of the course at St George's Hospital Medical School in London. To graduate she had to perform 20 autopsies, before following her husband-to-be from their "Old-England" across the Atlantic to New England, where they have both remained to the present day.

Tessa Hedley-Whyte was initially attracted to a career in paediatric pathology, inspired by Dr Gordon Vawter at the Boston Children's Hospital, but her interest in the nervous system began shortly after. The passage of time has confirmed that she certainly made the right choice ... but for all the wrong reasons!

Tessa was then training at the Brigham Hospital, but none of the pathologists were at all interested in the brain. During a teaching session, one said to Tessa “Oh, that’s the brain, I know nothing about it”. This was, of course, like a “red rag to a bull”, and she therefore started to plot her own course as a pediatric neuropathologist.

This was not easy. As a new speciality, there were several hurdles to leap over, and in parallel Tessa was developing her academic interest whilst refining her diagnostic skills in histopathology. She worked at several hospitals in Boston, eventually finding her way to the Massachusetts General Hospital (or MGH) and Harvard Medical School. There she became increasingly involved in medical education, assisting in the admission and evaluation of students, and shaping the medical curriculum.

Dr Hedley-Whyte’s research interests span the two extremes of neuropathology. On the one hand, her paediatric focus led her to explore the mechanisms of excessive cell growth that lead to brain tumour formation, particularly of the hormone-producing pituitary gland. On the other hand, she is a Principal Investigator in the Massachusetts Alzheimer Disease Research Centre, which uses novel molecular genetic and cell biology approaches to understand what causes nerve cell loss in later life. With over 150 scientific papers to her name, she continues

to publish in the New England Journal of Medicine, year-on-year.

During her career she has seen major changes in the role of the pathologist, from her early experiences of autopsy to establish the cause of death post hoc, through to the importance of intra-operative pathology, guiding the surgeon's knife in real-time. She has seen the dramatic decrease in the number of autopsies carried out on patients with now treatable diseases - such as children with acute leukaemia and cystic fibrosis. And in parallel she has seen a rise in the complications of new treatments such as chemotherapy, and of course, the consequences of the AIDS epidemic. She has always remained adaptable, attracted by new techniques and novel approaches, embedded in deep fascination for understanding human disease.

As if it were not enough to serve patients in Boston through accurate diagnosis, and throughout the world through research advance, there are two further facets that I must discuss further. First, Tessa has made a major contribution to medical education – both at the under-graduate and post-graduate level. As Training Director at the MGH for pathology she has seen a massive growth in the number of resident doctors in training. She did not see this as a chore, rather, (and I quote) “one of the greatest pleasures and sources of pride of an academic career is the opportunity to work with and watch the successful career

evolution of trainees and students”. Never one to feel threatened by the next generation, Tessa has been an encouragement and an inspiration to generations of pathologists now scattered across the globe.

The second strand is the simple fact that she is a woman. Against state-imposed heavy odds (9 to 1 against), which were embedded in the culture of the local A-level curriculum, she chose a medical career. And not only that, but in the fiercely male-dominated world of hospital medicine, a long way from her home. And yet... when asked by her students “have I ever been discriminated against because I am a woman?”, she has answered quite simply: “First, I have never had time to worry about it”, and “second, that I never had to apply for a job”.

Major changes in her career came from opportune moments, and in the words of Kipling, she quoted: “it seems to me that every card in my working life has been dealt to me in such a manner that I had to play it as it came”. Her move to the United States was one such example.

Her family tell me that, despite being quintessentially British, Tessa is now “fully Americanized” (spelt with a Z, Mr Chancellor). She maintains a beautiful house and garden in Concord, somehow finds the time to supply her family with a large array of meticulously produced needlework, supports her husband’s passion for all things equestrian, is a keen follower of

the American Football league, and (I am ashamed to say) even supports the U.S. team in the Ryder cup!

Despite this, she is proud of her roots – with both her family and medical foundations in Newcastle. Unfortunately neither of her brothers could be here tonight through unmovable work commitments, but I know that they wanted to be present, if only to remind us of her earlier prowess in lacrosse, and to apologise for losing the only salmon she ever hooked.

Mr Chancellor, Tessa Hedley-Whyte is now Director of Neuropathology at Massachusetts General Hospital, and is a “Scholar in Academy” at The Harvard Medical School. She is recognised as one of the most accomplished neuropathologists world-wide, receiving the “Meritorious Service Award” from the American Association of Neuropathologists, along with teaching awards for her (and I quote) “years of enlightened instruction and dedication”. However, despite now being a key part of the US “establishment”, she has tirelessly supported Newcastle University's activities since leaving her Alma Mater. She has been instrumental in raising the University's profile in the United States by hosting many events at exclusive venues in Boston, thus nurturing our transatlantic Alumni in stimulating evenings of discussion, debate and comradeship. Without her personal benefaction and interest, it would have been extremely difficult, nigh on impossible, to develop the strong links in the USA that we are fortunate enough to enjoy today. This provides

our University with expert advice, collaborations, benefactions and ongoing friendships for the future.

Thus, in recognition of her contribution to neuropathology and medical education, and for showing our American cousins exactly what “wer Geordie lass can dee”, I now ask that you bestow upon her an Honorary Fellowship of Newcastle University.

Citation by Professor Patrick Chinnery