

Michael David Rawlins DCL

Mr Chancellor,

May I now present to you our second Knight of the day. I doubt there is a single person in this congregation who has not had their life touched by Professor Sir Michael Rawlins. But what is perhaps even more remarkable, is that, were I to deliver this citation at any University throughout the world, this same statement would probably hold true.

As non-executive chairman of the National Institute for Clinical Excellence, or NICE, Michael Rawlins gave new meaning to the term “NICE guy”, shaping the practice of clinical medicine throughout the United Kingdom but his work has had major influence far beyond our shores.

In the words of one senior professional colleague, Professor Rawlins was the “founding father of Pharmacovigilance” – which, for the uninitiated, is the “scientific discipline of the detection, assessment, understanding and prevention of adverse effects of medicines”. In many ways, he helped drag medical practice out of the dark ages into the second half of the twentieth century forcing medical practitioners to rely on carefully measured scientific evidence when reaching for a prescription pad rather than handing out pills based on a tradition of convenient, but frequently misleading, anecdote.

Amongst his many achievements, Professor Rawlins was the first to classify Adverse Drug Reactions into two types, with type A being “predictable” and dose-related, and type B being “bizarre” and not related to the treatment dose. Like all important scientific advances, this simple classification seems so obvious in hind-sight – but his insight paved the way for the systematic dissection of drug toxicity, changing it from a dark art, to a scientific discipline.

Professor Sir Michael studied Medicine at St Thomas’ Hospital Medical School, graduating with honours in 1965 with a string of prizes under his belt. His skills as a leader were apparent from a very early age – not content to contribute his musical skills as a talented pianist and viola player; he spent many an hour conducting the St Thomas’ Medical School Orchestra.

By this time he had already begun a highly productive research career, leading to a prolific series of scientific publications touching all aspects of medicine. His curriculum vitae read like *The Pharmacopoeia*, the ABC of medicines – from anaesthetics to asthma, blood pressure to benzodiazepines, cardiac rhythm to cyclo-oxygenase.

Michael Rawlins moved to Newcastle in 1973, and became one of the first Consultant Physicians at the newly-opened Freeman Hospital, taking up the Ruth and Lionel Jacobsen Chair in Clinical Pharmacology at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne. Here, his work flourished. With Professor Sam Shuster he established the skin as a major site for drug metabolism on a par with the liver. And

talking of damaged livers with our last Pro-Vice Chancellor, Oliver James, he was amongst the first to realise the important pharmacological differences between young and old, systematically studying the effects of multiple interacting medicines in the elderly. These are but a few of the many areas where he advanced medical understanding. He is a true medical polymath.

In many ways his work laid the foundations for the Newcastle Biomedical Centre for Ageing Medicine. This is the only Department of Health-funded ageing research institute in the United Kingdom, forming the cornerstone of clinically-applied research in the North East of England.

Having set the gold standard for prescribing in Newcastle, he became increasingly involved in National and International organisations aimed at promoting evidence-based medicine and preventing the effects of drug toxicity. He was an active member of the national Committee on Safety of Medicines (or CSM), serving as sub-committee chairman from 1987-1992.

So how has this cutting-edge academic been so successful in shaping prescribing policy for well over a quarter of a century? In addition to his academic prowess, two additional attributes provide the key. First, he has continued to practice clinical medicine throughout his long career, remaining on-call for acute medical services for over 30 years as a Consultant Physician in Newcastle. This is most unusual for a high-flying academic, where there is a tendency to super-specialise, at

the expense of maintaining a broad knowledge base. However, his colleagues regard him as (and I quote) “a brilliant General Physician”, widely respected for his ability to make sense out of complexity. Through regular patient contact, he has kept his feet on the ground, whilst developing policy in a much broader arena.

His second key attribute is a keen interest in the political scene. He qualified in medicine in London at the same time as Dr David Owen, and was closely involved in the formation of the Social Democratic Party in the early 1980s. One might argue that the SDP was actually formed by a “gang of five”, with Mike Rawlins on the sidelines. He may even have considered standing for parliament. Fortunately for all of us, he was not seduced into a full-time political career. I am sure you would agree, Mr Chancellor, that Parliament might not be the best place, if one's career is to have a very practical benefit.

Rather, he used his political skills to develop and advance structures that would shape and guide prescribing across the European Union. A committed “Europhile”, and almost single handedly, Professor Rawlins used his skills of political persuasion to weld together all European Union states to form the EU equivalent of the United States Food and Drug Administration.

So why was Professor Rawlins made Knight Bachelor in 1999? Could it have been the construction of his harpsichord from scratch with his bare hands? Could it have been the unscrupulous way he manages to win every golf match? Or could it be his exemplary driving skills,

which (I understand) are admired so much by his three daughters?
I think not.

Having completed his second term at the CSM, Professor Rawlins was the obvious first port of call when the British Government formed the National Institute of Clinical Excellence, in 1999. NICE is an independent organisation giving guidance on the promotion of good health and the prevention and treatment of ill health. Although a non-executive chairman, his role has been very much “executive”, creating the structures within NICE that have shaped prescribing in the UK over the last decade. At times this has been in direct conflict with public opinion – but always it has been based on objective scientific evidence. He has set the bench-mark for equity in health-care across all postcodes within the United Kingdom, and for this alone we owe him a great deal.

As a previous Public Orator at our University, Professor Sir Michael Rawlins knows how difficult it can be to do justice to the career of such a distinguished figure in such a short time. However, I hope that, in his time-honoured way, I have provided the objective evidence underpinning my opening statements. In recognition of his outstanding contribution to the practice of evidence based medicine throughout the world, Mr Chancellor, I now ask that you bestow upon him the degree of Doctor of Civil Law, *honoris causa*.

Citation by Professor Patrick Chinnery