



FELLOWSHIP OF THE UNIVERSITY
HONORIS CAUSA

PROFESSOR PAUL FLECKNELL

9 MAY 2025

PROFESSOR PAUL FLECKNELL: HONORARY FELLOWSHIP

Chancellor Dharker, members of the University, distinguished alumni, and honoured guests,

The University Fellowship recognises members of our community who have carried responsibility with grace, making extraordinary contributions to the university, and through the university to the wider world. Paul Flecknell more than meets this description. As a veterinary scientist whose career has been dedicated to improving the welfare of animals, particularly laboratory animals, he has won dozens of national and international awards. But of even greater significance to us this evening, he served as the University's Principal Named Veterinary Surgeon and Director of the laboratory animal facilities for some 30 years. In that time, he has transformed those facilities – and our university – into a centre that is globally recognised for high standards in animal care and welfare. In doing so, he has empowered countless scientists across the university to do better research with greater care, and beyond our walls he has changed professional practice for the better.

Following qualification as a vet, Paul held a research scholarship in Bristol before joining the scientific staff of the Clinical Research Centre in London in 1977. His Churchill Fellowship in 1981 alerted him to often poor standards of anaesthesia and pain relief in animal laboratories. After completing his doctorate, by 1985 he reached a point in his career where he wanted to manage a facility as well as undertaking research in animal welfare. There aren't many posts that combine these elements, but the creation of a new Comparative Biology Centre here at Newcastle was an opportunity to do just that.

Paul tells me that he thought he'd probably come for 4 or 5 years and establish the centre, but he and his wife Ruth are Yorkshire folk and loved being back in the North. The combination of

management, veterinary support, research and education worked out well, so he ended up staying here for three decades – long enough to oversee the refurbishment of the original facility that he'd established. Paul says that 'it currently seems rather "unfashionable" to have a commitment to and admiration of a university – but I do have a strong attachment to both the University and the Toon.'

As Director of the new centre, Paul brought lab animal facilities under a common management system, raising standards and creating the CBC not just as a facility serving other researchers but as a centre of excellence in laboratory animal medicine and science in its own right. Running a successful centre presented challenges, not all of them serious. Paul Dearden, Business Operations Manager at the centre, tells me that Professor Flecknell became expert at justifying purchases to support the research. Finance Directors present this evening will be interested to know that he has at various times persuaded the procurement team to authorise the purchase of Maltesers, Ribena, and Skittles (all required as motivation for lab animals), as well as the loan of 10 bearded dragons from a pet shop for a behavioural study. But it's alright – I understand these were returned to the shop after the study and we got our deposit back!

Research with animals is one of the most sensitive and highly regulated activities that a university can undertake, governed by a complex system of Home Office licensing, regulation and inspection. At Newcastle, such research comes under the University Vet and the Animal Welfare Ethical Review Body, but the ultimate license holder is the Registrar and Paul has helped to keep more than one holder of that office on the right side of the law and abreast of good practice, sometimes in pressured circumstances. University Fellow Dr John Lloyd, who served on our Review Body for 11 years, chairing it for 7, tells me that Paul is a collegial,

modest, leader who is keen to bring all voices – scientific, veterinary and lay – into decision-making. He also tells me how, as he attended meetings at national level organised by the RSPCA, he repeatedly saw how highly Paul's work was regarded in the profession. John also tells me that, when Paul stepped down, the very fact that it was the Flecknell post we were filling was itself an attractor to talented applicants.

To a lay reader, Paul's research is striking and impactful. Paul feels that recommendations on animal welfare should be based on evidence rather than "vet knows best". He has questioned long-held assumptions about how to assess and treat animal discomfort or pain, reevaluating evidence from the past and providing new evidence to inform best practice. But it's a long road from research to real change. Paul realised that professional uptake of new research findings required effort devoted to education and training. Aside from his text – the standard in the field and now in its 5th edition – his training materials have evolved from 35mm slide sets to CDs, to web sites, and finally to the Research Animal Training e-learning system that he actively develops today.

But impact is not only seen in professional guidelines, but in talented people inspired. Dr Matt Leach, who now directs the Comparative Biology Centre, points to the researchers trained and mentored by Paul, and the international groups he has supported. Matt speaks movingly of an occasion when – very early in his own career and before joining Newcastle – he was dropped in the deep end at a major conference, required at short notice to present a paper to an audience of hundreds. Anxious, he'd hidden away – I won't say where – thinking himself underprepared ("I didn't even have a tie!", he says). But he was lucky to have Paul on stage before him. Paul, I gather, found him, shared his own struggles with nerves, and talked him

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round. He even handed his tie over to Matt before he stepped out on stage. Sharing vulnerability is a mark of true leadership.

A successful leader, researcher, professional vet and teacher, it's no wonder that off duty the now emeritus Prof. Flecknell can't stop juggling roles. Paul's wife Ruth tells me that, at home, he is known for something else entirely: his baking. The same quiet precision he applies to his work goes into every batch of his legendary bread. His wildlife, particularly bird, photography is every bit as painstaking. It's also a measure of the technological sophistication of the Flecknell family that Paul has developed an interest in computer gaming, and Ruth sent me her thoughts in both human and AI-assisted forms!

Ruth cannot be with us this evening, but simply says this "Paul - I'm so proud of everything you've achieved. This fellowship is richly deserved, and it's a reflection not just of your expertise, but of your values. Quiet leadership, compassion, and an unwavering belief in doing the right thing - even when it's not the easiest. Congratulations, and thank you."

Chancellor Dharker, in recognition of his bearing responsibility with grace, of his weaving animal welfare into the fabric of research within and beyond this university, and for the distinction that he has brought to us by doing so, I present to you Professor Paul Flecknell, for admission to the fellowship of Newcastle University.

Prof. J S Fitzgerald

Senior Public Orator

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