

Chancellor Dharker,

Professor Richard Oreffo OBE is emeritus Professor of Musculoskeletal Science at Southampton. He is an eminent and accomplished scientist and founder of the Cowie Foundation.

It is impossible to overstate Richard's achievements. He has published over 350 papers which have been cited over 36,000 times and has supervised almost 60 MD and PhDs. For many, this would be enough, but not for Richard who has devoted his professional life to understanding better how cells differentiate and bones and cartilage repair - but this is not abstract or purely laboratory study - he is motivated by the desire to improve lives. His commitment and joy in this work was evident when Richard told me the story of an elderly patient with limited mobility so transformed, he arrived for follow up meeting in his Audi TT.

Richard and his twin brother Victor were born in the UK to their Nigerian father and Irish mother, they moved to Nigeria soon after the boys were born. Later, the opportunity for further study brought Richard's father, a physician, to Bristol, accompanied by their mother. The boys remained in Nigeria. The advent of the Biafran war in 1967 was a difficult time for the boys who happily were able to return to the UK. Despite this challenging start Richard told me he considers himself both 'privileged and lucky'. At primary school in Bristol, headteacher, Mr Gutsell, took the 8 year old boys under his wing, it is to him that Richard attributes his early achievements and aspiration.

Richard went on to study at Liverpool and then to Wolfson College Oxford gaining a DPhil in Medicine. Here, he became a keen rower, meeting fellow rowers, life-long friend Tim Clayden, Tim's wife Carol and his own future wife, Sonia. Tim recalls happy times together, but added Richard was also very focussed on his studies. After Oxford, their paths diverged. Richard's studies took him to the US whilst Sonia went to AstraZeneca near Manchester. Tim

served as a diplomat. Richard and his now wife Sonia visited Tim and Carol in Poland, Australia and, of course, Nigeria.

Richard is firmly committed to building the next generation in science and medicine. Jon Dawson, one of Richard's first PhD students, and now a Professor at Southampton himself, told how Richard has inspired and created opportunities for so many, encouraging people to 'squeeze the most from every moment'. Energetic was one word used to describe Richard, who is a keen walker and has spent many holidays with Sonia, and when possible, his daughters Grace and Cicely. This evidently pays off, Jon told me of early days as a PhD student going with Richard to meet his second supervisor on 7<sup>th</sup> floor, Richard headed for the stairs, arriving two floors ahead of his student.

Sonia tells me that Richard is pretty calm, but is frustrated and motivated by the injustices and inequalities in society. This frustration was given focus in 2020 when George Floyd was killed. Richard looked in at the world he knows best and saw the lack of representation of Black people as academics and as scholars and was driven to look at what could be done to 'even the odds'. Hence the Cowrie Foundation was born.

The Cowrie Foundation is open to Black and mixed heritage British young people who have secured their university place on merit alone. Universities contribute fees while the Foundation provides funds for living expenses and support to enable Cowrie Scholars to succeed; with a named mentor and practical support providing the 'safety net' that many get from their parents. Young people who have overcome immense odds, many from single parent households with very low incomes, some with caring responsibilities and yet have the resilience and determination to 'go for it'. It is of the Cowrie Foundation which this highly eminent scientist is most proud. As Richard said, "talent is everywhere but opportunity is not".

In the early days, Richard describes the Foundation as a family endeavour and attributes success to the support of his daughters and Sonia, who in moments

of doubt told Richard "if you don't try, you'll never know". We are delighted that Sonia, Grace and Cicely are joining the celebrations today.

Richard wrote emails to VCs at 35 universities all sent within 20mins. Our own VC Professor Day, was the first to reply, stating 'we're in'. That was all that was needed to convince others. Five years later, the Cowrie Foundation is supporting 52 scholars, the first 10 graduate this year, including one here at Newcastle who said "the Foundation has given me the confidence to truly make the most of my education in a way I never expected I'd be able to do".

So what does Professor Oreffo do in his 'spare time? Richard loves reading, was previously a rower and runner but now enjoys walking. Sonia told me he is most relaxed near water. He enjoys the company of others but also reminds guests they 'all have homes to go to'.

Richard is truly collaborative, a community builder, inspiring and driven. He is selfless and committed and holds true to his beliefs. He is described by those who know him best as "a darn good academic, an extraordinary Dad and an exceptional friend". Despite his many achievements, Richard's one unfulfilled ambition is for the Cowrie Foundation to be established in perpetuity.

Professor Oreffo was made a Fellow of the Academy of Medical Sciences in 2022 and was awarded an OBE in the King's New Year's Honours for services to education equality and musculoskeletal science.

Liz Reilly, Trustee of Cowrie, describes Richard as an inspiration for all of us, to not only build expertise and have impactful careers – but also to ask: what else matters to me and what else could I do? When Richard launched Cowrie, he did so acknowledging that he didn't know much about scholarship programmes or fundraising. He was in learning mode and yet, look at what he has achieved in just five years. May we all be lifelong learners with the humility and moral purpose Richard exemplifies.

Chancellor Dharker, in recognition of his achievements in education equality through the Cowrie Foundation and in musculoskeletal science, I present to you Professor Richard Oreffo as a candidate for the award of Doctor of Science, *honoris causa*.

*Citation by Professor Ashley Adamson, Public Orator*

*10<sup>th</sup> July 2025*