OBITUARY

ALAN GRAHAM APLEY
1914 – 1996

With the death of Alan Apley on 20 December 1996 the orthopaedic world lost one of its best-known and best-loved teachers and writers. For over 50 years in an unassuming and often self-effacing way he used his skills in communication to help and to guide the expansion of orthopaedic knowledge and practice. He maintained a clear view of the essentials, viewed each advance in the light of his experience, and always emphasised a hands-on, clinical and caring approach to patients. Throughout his life he engaged in distilling the important facts from the mass of new information and then presented them in clear and memorable words.

He knew that he had unique gifts of expression and presentation, but rarely explained and never mentioned the hours of hard work, the patience and the dogged persistence which had produced such results. His insistence on the ‘drawer’ method of writing papers and lectures was not theoretical; his own work was always put away for later review and polishing, many times. Pencil and paper were his tools; a lecture or a chapter of a book would undergo painstaking revision after revision. The ‘spontaneity’ and the ‘readability’, the clarity, the memorable phrases, and even the jokes, were carefully orchestrated and timed. Each lecture was reviewed after delivery, improved, and rememorised for the next fortunate audience.

Alan Apley was born in London, the youngest son of Polish parents; his father had served in the Russian Army. In South London, Alan, his two brothers and one sister all showed the intelligence and energy often seen in second-generation immigrants. His success at London County Council schools in Battersea and at the Regent Street Polytechnic led him to medical studies at University College Hospital in London. He qualified MB BS in 1938 and became a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons of England in 1941. He then served during the Second World War as an Army medical officer in India.

Returning to London, he completed his orthopaedic training and in 1947 was appointed as a consultant to the Rowley Bristow Orthopaedic Hospital at Pyrford on the south-western outskirts of London. This was one of a number of tuberculosis hospitals which had been developed into centres of orthopaedic excellence. It had close links with St Thomas’ Hospital and with George Perkins, the inspirational Professor of Surgery. From him, Alan Apley absorbed an understanding of the pathology and the healing of orthopaedic and traumatic lesions which was to be the sheet anchor of his own clinical work.

His talent for teaching soon became apparent, and lectures at Pyrford developed into a special course for the Final FRCS, starting in 1948. This was then the basic selection examination for all branches of surgery. Would-be surgeons, especially those with little orthopaedic experience, found the two long weekends at the Rowley Bristow an essential if somewhat frightening preparation for Finals. The orthopaedic knowledge was so well organised that typed notes were requested, copied and passed around. These were seen by Ian Aird, the fiery Professor of Surgery at the Royal Postgraduate Hospital in Hammersmith, who sent for the author and instructed him to turn them into a book.

The first edition appeared as an unillustrated softback in 1959, interleaved with blank pages for personal notes. It was an immediate success. When the publishers offered to print a limited number of pictures for the second edition, Alan Apley’s typical response, involving much labour, was to produce that number of composites, each containing a large number of postage-stamp, but perfectly adequate, images. Keeping this book up to date would have daunted many, but not until the sixth edition did he recruit Louis Solomon as co-author. It is now in its seventh edition as Apley’s system and a concise version is in its second edition. It is so popular throughout the world that pirated editions have appeared, which Alan found rather flattering. His latest work with Professor Solomon on clinical examination will now be published posthumously, although he saw an early copy before he died. Many other books had the very considerable benefit of his co-authorship, editing or other assistance.

The FRCS courses continued, becoming known as the ‘Apley’ course. Their success led to requests for more, at
home and overseas. He always responded, using to advantage his wonderful collection of slides. He directed many courses at the Royal College of Surgeons of England and it was no surprise when in 1973 he was elected to its Council by a record vote. He enjoyed the administrative and intellectual challenges and was a Vice-President from 1983 to 1985, delighting in the ceremonial. He was appointed Director of Orthopaedics at St Thomas’ Hospital in 1972, and was Honorary Treasurer of the British Orthopaedic Association from 1972 to 1977 receiving the rare distinction of Honorary Fellowship in 1985, having delivered the Robert Jones lecture in 1978 and the Watson-Jones lecture in 1984, appropriately enough on ‘Surgeons and Writers’.

Alan Apley became the Editor of the Journal of Bone and Joint Surgery in 1984, at the age of 70 years, with undiminished energy and firm views on standards and presentation. He selected and rejected articles with great care; his letters to disappointed authors were all written by hand, in pencil, and revised before they were typed. They were always encouraging, never unkind; some authors, delighted with his response, discovered only at their second read that their work had not been accepted. His other great skill was the ability to edit a muddled or ugly sentence into clear prose. Under his kindly editorship, authors felt happy to submit their work; there was a steady increase in the number of submissions and the beginning of the now firmly international content of the Journal.

After retiring again, at 75 years of age, he increased his teaching and writing activities. In 1990, for example, he gave instructional courses or major lectures in 11 countries. When he became ill in Autumn 1996, his aim was to be fit for a teaching visit to Australia planned for Spring 1997.

In all of these ways Alan Apley had a pivotal influence on the world-wide development of orthopaedic surgery. In his patient manner he insisted, sometimes quite firmly, on the continuing value of many ‘old-fashioned’ virtues: listening to the patient, careful clinical examination, and an understanding of the biological processes of disease and repair. Many of his interests, however, were wider. He skied and was an accomplished pianist, continuing to play in small chamber groups to the time of his last illness.

His final and richly deserved honour was the award of the Honorary Medal of the Royal College of Surgeons of England. This was established in 1802 for “liberal acts or distinguished labours, researches and discoveries eminently conducive to the improvement of natural knowledge and the healing art”. It had not been awarded since 1989, and previous medallists include Sir Alexander Fleming, Frederick Wood Jones, Lord Webb Johnson, Lord Brock and Sir Stanford Cade. In his own quiet way, Alan Apley fully deserved to be added to this distinguished list.

His eldest brother John, a distinguished paediatrician, died before him. A second brother, Martin, lives in London. His son Richard and his daughter Mary, from his first marriage to Janie, have both inherited his interest and skill in music. His second wife, Violet, brought great joy into his later years, supported him in his travels and cared for him with amazing optimism and energy during his final illness. We extend our condolences and sympathy to all his family.

PHILIP FULFORD

Alan Apley devoted most of his indefatigable energy to the teaching of postgraduate students and orthopaedic surgeons worldwide. How fortunate it was that he lived long enough to dedicate five full decades to this. We mourn his death, but are thankful for his life.

Alan’s internationally famous ‘Pyrford Postgraduate Course’, held twice each year, was attended by well over 5000 orthopaedic trainees and surgeons from the UK and countless other countries. It may be less well known that he organised and lectured at annual satellite courses for 18 years in New York and for 15 years in Toronto.

His lectures on orthopaedics and fractures were superb. Having yearned to be an actor, he did have some theatrical training, and his presentations at home and abroad reflected this flair. His dramatic delivery gave clarity and impact, which was seasoned with a delightful sense of humour. Alan was also in great demand as an invited Visiting Professor. He served in this capacity in seven universities in the United States, four in Canada, four in Australia and 22 in other countries throughout the world.

He was equally effective with the written word. His internationally acclaimed textbooks have been used by hundreds of thousands of students and orthopaedic surgeons worldwide. It is understandable that he became a legend in his own time, and is entirely appropriate that the sixth and seventh editions have been co-authored by Louis Solomon as Apley’s system of orthopaedics and fractures.

He has certainly been the finest, the most effective and the most respected teacher of orthopaedics and fractures of this century. He has been facile princeps, easily the first, and his magnificent contributions as a teacher will live on through his inspiring books.

Above all, Alan Apley was a true and loyal friend to all of us, throughout the world, who have had the privilege of knowing him in person.

ROBERT B. SALTER

Alan Apley was an enthusiast. His exceptional ability with written and spoken words displayed a clear and well-ordered mind which enabled him to reduce every problem to its essentials. Anyone who worked closely with him in any of his many distinguished roles soon became aware of these remarkable qualities. He could extract the essence from a paper or a discussion, pick out the salient points, and give a fair and unbiased opinion, usually in a crisp and amusing way.

He will also be remembered for his innate sense of humour, which made him a wonderful companion. On a lecture platform, in a council or a committee, in a large or a small group, at work or at play, it was always fun to be with him.

DAVID L. EVANS

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