

Obituary

Sir Roy Yorke Calne

(30 December 1930–6 January 2024)



A PERSONAL REMINISCENCE

Many years ago when I had graduated from Cambridge University to do my clinical studies in Guy's Hospital in London, I lived in a slum building called St Christopher's House at the back of the hospital, which had been leased to house us poor students. One of my contemporaries, and a great friend, was a young man called Donald Calne who was up from

Oxford and who later became a world-famous neurologist in Canada discovering, among his other major contributions, that levodopa was beneficial to sufferers from Parkinson disease.

Donald told me he had a brother called Roy, also a Guy's graduate, who had won the Hallett prize given to the candidate who topped the Primary FRCS (Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons) examination in England and was working with the legendary Francis (Franny) Moore and Joseph Murray at Harvard's Peter Bent Brigham Hospital in Boston on 6-mercaptopurine's ability to prevent dogs rejecting the kidneys that had been transplanted into them.

The next time I heard about Roy Calne was that he had been appointed, at the age of 35, to be Professor of Surgery in the University of Cambridge. There he ran a very successful kidney transplant programme and also showed that azathioprine was better than 6-mercaptopurine in preventing rejection.

After finishing my house job in surgery at the Royal Postgraduate Medical School in London, I applied to become a registrar at Addenbrooke's Hospital in Cambridge under Professor Calne. There were 130 applicants of whom 10 were shortlisted who were all more talented and accomplished than I was. At the interview Professor Calne asked me what I wanted to do in the future. I replied that I wanted to return to India and give the best medical care in the world to the poorest of the poor. I got the job.

It was a wonderful experience. On our on-call days we used to do about six emergency operations on patients from the whole of East Anglia and every Tuesday we went to the University's Veterinary Centre in Babraham, a village just outside Cambridge to do liver transplants in pigs. There Sir Roy not only established a technique for doing the procedure but also did some immunological studies in which he showed that the liver transplants were not rejected as much as kidneys and also if both were transplanted together the immunosuppression required would be lower—the liver had some 'immunoprotective' action.

Professor Calne also had a very active sporting life and played squash and tennis regularly. We were both part of the Addenbrooke's squash team, which had an outside match at least once a month with Oxford colleges and British public schools.

One fateful day I was summoned to theatre to assist during the first liver transplant operation being done in Europe. Franny Moore who was visiting Cambridge was also in the theatre and after 15 hours the deceased donor liver was implanted successfully. The patient lived. Although there had been a huge

amount of publicity after a heart transplant procedure that had also been done at the time—jingoistic television programmes on 'Backing Britain', Calne kept out of the limelight and thought that this kind of 'advertising' was unethical. It was also fortunate because the following three liver transplants were unsuccessful—the operation blocked the theatre for hours, there was a blood loss of 40 to 60 units and other patients were made to wait their turn for operation. There was a lot of opposition to the programme being continued; in fact, another surgical consultant was heard saying that 'if you see blood trickling outside the theatre door it is Professor Calne doing a liver transplant'.

Yet he persisted and the results improved—the operations were quicker with much less blood loss and then Calne made another ground-breaking discovery. Cyclosporine a fungal product was being tried by Borel and his associates for its antibacterial properties and was being rejected as being useless when Calne decided to use it as an antirejection drug. It changed the face of transplantation and the 1-year survival of kidney grafts rose from 50% to over 80%.

With Roger Williams in King's College Hospital in London he established a successful Cambridge–King's liver transplant programme driving us in his MG sport car at 80 miles an hour on the motorway. Calne also did the world's first liver, heart and lung transplant in 1986 (with John Wallwork) and the world's first successful 'organ cluster' transplant (stomach, intestine, pancreas, liver and kidney) in 1994.

In his 'spare' time, Professor Calne painted portraits of many of his patients including the artist John Bellamy who, in turn, did one of Sir Roy, which hangs in the National Portrait Gallery in London. Many of Calne's paintings are being exhibited in major British museums.

For his immense contributions to transplantation science, Calne received many honours including (with Thomas Starzl, another transplantation great) the De Bakey–Lasker Award, and the Fellowship of the Royal Society and a Knighthood.

When we were campaigning to change the law in India to stop the abhorrent trading in human organs and recognize brain death to allow heart and liver transplantation, we were in constant touch with him (and Sir Terence English who was President of the Royal College of Surgeons of England) for advice on how to go about this. Sir Roy helped us every step of the way.

My last contact with him was when I invited him to deliver the Gyan Burman Oration in Delhi 5 years ago and he spoke on the subject 'It cannot be done—the Story of Organ Transplantation'. It was an enthralling and unforgettable lecture that many in the audience still remember.

I consider myself fortunate to have known such a great man. There will never be his like again.

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