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**The History of The Christie Hospital**

**Dr. David G. Poppitt**

**Reviewer: Janette Sykes**

Fundraising alongside madcap comic Norman Wisdom on behalf of Manchester's world-renowned Christie Hospital was once all in a day's work for cancer specialist Dr. David Poppitt. "Norman was fantastic – probably the most magnanimous and generous guy I have ever met," revealed the retired cancer specialist as he outlined Wisdom's key role in helping to raise cash for vital, life-saving cancer research. "He was involved in our North West Golf Classic competition, and also became President of our Christie Appeal. He also told me that on the day he was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II, he deliberately planned to trip up after she had bestowed him the honour. As he walked away and performed his stunt, he turned round and was delighted to see Her Majesty with a broad grin on her face!"

Another entertainer who played a leading role during David's time as the Christie's chief fundraiser was Roy Castle, who was diagnosed with terminal cancer at the hospital. Despite his illness, he fronted a 'Tapathon' Challenge at the former G-Mex Centre for 7,149 people that also featured the Roly Polys, ballet dancer Wayne Sleep and the female cast of Coronation Street. "It was a fantastic sight, but unfortunately Roy died six months later, recalled David. "Fronting the fundraising and working with celebrities like Les Dawson and Bernard Cribbins was one hell of an experience, and we got substantial support from businesses too – including Robinsons Brewery in Stockport, which donated £200,000."

David (79) – who was a senior medical research officer at The Christie for 25 years – began by outlining the origins and development of what is now Europe's largest single site cancer centre and his pro-active role in its pioneering research, public awareness and income-generating programmes over the years.

Though speaking about a serious and often distressing subject, David managed to inject some impish humour into his presentation as he explained the Welsh origins of his unusual name – citing ancestors linked with sheep-stealing and playing for Wolverhampton Wanderers, as well as practical jokes played during his later career in Manchester.

Born in Cardiff, David and his family moved to Salford when he was nine, and attended Bolton School, where he developed a love for Rugby Union as well as pursuing his scientific ambitions. While at Manchester Medical School, he visited what was then The Christie Hospital and Holt Radium Institute as part of a quest to decide in which area of medicine he would specialise. Aged 21, he was delighted to discover that the ratio of men to women working there was 1:5, so was determined to go and work there after qualifying. His initial instincts to maximise his opportunity to meet the opposite sex were subsequently proved right, as it was there that he met a young radiographer, Susie, who has been his wife for almost 50 years.

When David first went to The Christie in 1966, it had 300 staff and occupied a small unit on Wilmslow Road. Now known as The Christie NHS Foundation Trust, it was the first hospital in the UK to be accredited as a comprehensive cancer centre and employs more than 4,000 people. During his time there, he developed an interest in cancer education, which then led him to found the Christie Charity and last year raised an astonishing £87 million to fund its world-respected research programme.

Perhaps one of the more surprising facts that David related was that cancer had been traced back in the mists of time and had been found in dinosaurs. It hadn't been a problem through the ages, he said, because cancer is a disease of age, and the majority of people who die from it are over 70. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the average age when people died was 45, so not many lived long enough to develop it. During past visits to Kenya and Uganda, he found it was not so much a problem as in Europe, as the average age of death is 50, and many perish from malaria or AIDS.

Cancer, added David, came to the fore during the Industrial Revolution in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, when both boy chimney sweeps and men working in mills tended to develop scrotal cancer. The boys were vulnerable because they were naked and so were exposed to carcinogens, and the men because they got their hands covered in oil and grease and wiped them on rags which they put back in their pockets

The origins of The Christie date back to Victorian times, when Stockport-born mechanical engineer and inventor Sir Joseph Whitworth; entrepreneur and philanthropist John Rylands; brewer and Lord Mayor of Manchester Edward Holt and lawyer and philanthropist Richard Copley Christie came together to build a specific unit to help people with cancer. It was first known as the Cancer Pavilion and Institute for Incurables, then The Cancer Pavilion and Home. When Christie died, said David, his wife Helen used her influence to have the hospital renamed The Christie Hospital in 1901.

During his lifetime, Edward Holt developed an interest in the potential of X-rays, and in the 1920s the hospital was renamed The Christie Hospital and Holt Radium Institute in his honour. In the early 1990s, The Christie was one of the first hospitals in the country to become an NHS Trust, enabling it to govern itself. Holt Radium Institute was then dropped from its name, though Edward's original legacy lives on in the names given to the Holt entrance and the Holt Library. Key names linked with the hospital's groundbreaking research and development of radiotherapy and associated manuals were its first director, Professor Ralston Paterson and his wife Dr Edith Paterson, and another partnership between J.B. Meredith and W.J. Massey.

Now The Christie has a radiotherapy catchment area ranging from Barrow-in-Furness in the north to Crewe in the south. Developing a network of radiotherapy units across the North West began in the 1970s, when the first was opened at the Royal Infirmary in Preston. These days there are units across the region, including one in Macclesfield – all of which have increased rates of diagnosis and treatment. The idea of chemotherapy arose during the First World War, when scientists developed it using derivatives of mustard gas, and has been modified using other effective agents over the years. During his career, David worked on the potential of new agents in clinical trials, and explained the complicated process of gradually

increasing doses used to reach the maximum point at which a drug can be tolerated, and therefore effective.

Treating cancer, explained David, is complex, because every patient is different, and each responds differently to treatment. Thus it is not an exact science, and treatments have to be individually tailored, using a combination of surgery, radiotherapy and chemotherapy. Staff at the hospital wear special badges which measure their exposure to radiation, and these are monitored to ensure their safety. Any breaches of the system are taken very seriously – one of his colleagues once had a reading of more than the six times higher than it should have been, because he was right next to the vials he was using to inject patients (though he is still very much alive and working in the USA). Another time, a small black ball on the floor caused consternation until it was established that it was a grape!

There were, however, lighter moments during David's research career. While working he once realised that opposite his laboratory window, on the opposite side of the road, were a red public telephone box and a bus stop, beside which the same four or five people would wait each morning. He couldn't resist taking the phone number and ringing it while they were there, asking to speak to each of them in turn and describing the way they looked in great detail. Fine, until they quickly sussed what was actually going on! Another time, he and a colleague were working through the night in the winter, and during a break built a snowman. Again fine, until colleagues later arrived for the day shift and discovered that they couldn't actually get through the door to start work!

When he was 40, what David described as his 'gift of the gab' led him to leave research and concentrate on cancer education, because he realised that the main response from the community to the mere mention of the word cancer was one of fear. "It was known as the Big C, and people believed that if someone went to The Christie, that was it, they would die," he said. "I was asked to help change that perception and heighten and improve their understanding of what actually happened at the hospital. For a while I worked closely with a number of people, including Eamonn O'Neal at BBC Radio Manchester, and our efforts were incredibly successful."

Later David became The Christie's Appeals Director, eventually with a staff of ten, to raise funds to support the hospital's continually-evolving research programme, and has very fond memories of working with a string of prominent people to make its life-saving work possible. He is particularly pleased that survival rates for children's cancer have improved substantially – '95 per cent of children are now surviving leukaemia' – and that great strides have been made in detecting and treating prostate cancer, though he is concerned that other types, such as lung and pancreatic, remain difficult to treat. And although he is retired, he reflected: "You never really leave The Christie. I still keep involved clinically, so that I know what is going on and what progress is being made."

- Members of Buxton and District u3a who attended the presentation contributed a generous donation of £213.50 towards the Christie Appeal.