Obituary

Dennis Snow Ridley (1918–2009)

Dennis Ridley, who has died aged 91, described the Ridley-Jopling system for classifying patients with leprosy. He did this work at the Hospital for Tropical Diseases, London with his clinician colleague, William Jopling. This classification was both prescient in recognising the role of the host immune system in causing disease manifestations, and practical, because the Ridley-Jopling classification informed prognosis through insights into the reactions that can develop. It also provided a common framework for comparing case series and studies from countries around the world. A World Health Organization publication in 2004 reviewing 25 years of leprosy treatment, said of the Ridley-Jopling classification that it was ‘...a landmark, and the classification became the mandatory reference system for any scientific investigation involving leprosy patients’.

Their work arose out of the close observation that they gave to their patients in London correlating clinical and pathological findings in patients and their skin biopsies from presentation through to healing, and in leprosy reactions with inflammation of existing skin patches or appearances of new lesions. He recognised the spectrum of changes which reflected a reciprocal relationship between the vigour of the host response in the tissues and the numbers of leprosy bacteria present in the skin. These concepts were published first in 1963 and then refined in 1967. Dennis had appreciated the fundamental role of the host immune response in causing disease manifestations when the science of immunology was beginning and later work by immunologists has confirmed the role of the cell types in these lesions.

The tropics came to Dennis as tissue samples from patients with leprosy from around the world, particularly in the Medical Research Council Unit in Sungei Buloh in Malaysia, where studies on leprosy were undertaken by Michael Waters. Dennis Ridley provided the pathological expertise for these studies which lead to the development of multi-drug therapy, now the international standard. He also collaborated with RJW Rees in experimental studies at the National Institute for Medical Research in Mill Hill. Dennis travelled widely for the World Health Organization as a consultant to their Expert Advisory Panel on Leprosy and to lead workshops on the pathology of leprosy in many countries in the tropics. He also worked on the pathology of cutaneous leishmaniasis, identifying some similarities to the leprosy spectrum. He contributed to 120 scientific papers, wrote a pamphlet of skin biopsy in leprosy published in the Documenta Geigy series and a book on the pathogenesis of leprosy and related diseases.

Dennis Snow Ridley was born in Harpenden. He went to medical school at University College, London graduating in 1942. He then served as an army medical officer in Europe. He trained in pathology at University College Hospital and was appointed consultant pathologist at the Hospital for Tropical Diseases in 1955 retiring in 1985. Here he met Marian, a skilled
histology technician, who became his second wife. She was actively involved in leprosy work with Dennis. Always approachable, but quiet and unassuming, Dennis played an active role in the work of the hospital. He was involved with the work of UK based leprosy charities.

He taught at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine where he was a visiting professor.

At The Hospital for Tropical Diseases he supervised the diagnostic parasitological laboratory at the Hospital for Tropical Diseases introducing the ELISA serology technique for detecting anti-parasite antibodies in serum. The ELISA antibody test for schistosomiasis they developed is still used.

Dennis was not a self publicist, and was not a skilled speaker in lectures, but wrote his papers with admirable, simple clarity. Marking the 30th anniversary of the publication of their classification, Ridley and Jopling jointly received the Rickard Christophers Medal of the Royal Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene, and Dennis was elected a Fellow of University College in 1992 and made an OBE in 1993.

He was a devout Christian attending St Marylebone Church where he and Marian tended the church garden. He was an avid reader, and loved theatre and opera with a production of Salome his most memorable opera performance seen. He enjoyed good food and wine, particularly white Burgundy. He and Marian had a wide circle of friends large derived from their work, and they took every opportunity to see them.

He was married twice. His second wife, Marian, died in April 2008. They had no children.

Denis Snow Ridley OBE MD FRCPath Born 1918, qualified University College, London 1942, died April 22 2009.

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