

## Obituary



### Noel Thompson 1914–1989

For a good number of years, Noel Thompson was managing Editor of this *Journal*. Thus, we remember him with gratitude. He was born in 1914 in Newcastle Upon Tyne. During the Far Eastern Campaign, he served as a dental surgeon, attached to a maxillofacial unit of the Army. The war ended, he took up medicine and qualified with honors in 1950. After completion of a full education in General Surgery, he trained in Plastic Surgery, both in the United Kingdom and in the United States. In 1959, he was appointed a consultant in Plastic Surgery at Stoke Mandeville Hospital and later became a consultant in Plastic Surgery to the Middlesex Hospital, London. He preferred this position to a very honorable offer from John Converse to settle in New York.

In 1979, he retired from active work in Plastic Surgery. With his family, he spent the winter in London, the rest of the year in Tuscany, reconstructing a formerly dilapidated farmhouse. He died at the age of 75 of a short illness. Noel Thompson is survived by his wife Christine and his three children – one daughter and two sons.

I would like this to be Noel's official obituary. He was a worldwide recognized leader in Plastic Surgery, building one of the best training units in his country; the reader might be interested to know the example he set and the model he was to those in training. I had the opportunity to know him closely since 1961, when he spent three months on the service of Lyndon A. Peer as a winner of the First Prize, Junior Classification, in the Essay Contest of the Foundation of the American Society of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery.

Why, after taking a higher dental degree, did he go back to medical school to become a plastic surgeon, having even been offered a permanent commission to stay in the Army Dental Corps? Following his first contacts with Plastic Surgery during his military career, he deeply admired its creativity, both in theory and practice, and the possibility to develop new ideas, to test them experimentally and apply them clinically. When he presented a paper with all details, for a full afternoon, on "the subcutaneous dermis graft, a clinical and histological study in man", [1] Lyndon Peer remarked: "Noel, you have also transplanted muscle." "Muscle?" "Yes, the arrectores pilorum." Full of his intellectual drive, combined with his intellectual curiosity and perseverance, the same evening and later he said to me: "I must find the way to successfully graft muscle," probably only small muscles will work." "By chance," he told me later, "I read a paper on enzymatic changes in denervated muscles – and then it was simple to select and denervate small human muscles and graft them successfully." [2]

Noel Thompson never sat in judgement of other people, but he would criticize anybody who put convenience before probity. He saw the place of those he called "good-cutting surgeons," but they did not excite him. He was straightforward also outside the operating theatre. He believed that if you had taken an intellectual decision or made a correct moral judgement, then you adhered to it, even if this meant difficulties or being a loner. Thus, one of his fundamental convictions: that excellence creates its own immunity, was painfully attacked, when a medical committee, without consulting him, destroyed his service at the Middlesex Hospital.

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Noel Thompson did not profess any religious belief. He aptly recognized all the miracles of his creator. His "ground-personnel", however, he considered inadequate to Him.

The cathedral of science, being built not by the genius of one man, but by the combined effort of many, is still under construction. Noel Thompson, in this endeavor, has laid down a few essential, universally accepted building blocks, upon which further progress becomes possible.

## References

1. Thompson N (1960) The subcutaneous dermis graft. *Plast Reconstr Surg* 26:1-22
2. Thompson N (1970) Treatment of facial paralysis by free skeletal muscle grafts. *Transaction Fifth Internat Congr Plast Reconstr Surg Butterworths Australia*

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I wish to use my prerogative as the Editor and as a friend to add my own tribute to Noel Thompson. He was sophisticated, charming and intelligent, but above all, honest. When I visited him in my early days in plastic surgery, he made a statement which I have frequently quoted as a measure of the man; he said, "I love research, and I wish I could do it full time because I am not a very good technical surgeon." This was said at the height of his career when he had an international practice. Who among us would have the integrity and insight to say this to a junior on his way up. As a result of this statement, I became a great admirer of his and forcibly corrected inaccurate statements attributed to him. This latter situation occurred with disturbing regularity.

One of his disappointments was that he never held an official position within the British Association of Plastic Surgeons. There must have been a good reason for this; however, it should be known that he is remembered not as a politician, but as a teacher. He would be delighted to know that in many obscure areas of the world, someone will pop up with the statement, uttered with a great deal of pride, "I trained with Mr. Noel Thompson." These are the fortunate ones. Noel Thompson has left an example – not of a master surgeon, these are few and far between – but as a teacher with an inquiring mind willing to submit his ideas to clinical trial and to freely exchange knowledge.

What better memory can a man leave behind. Our pupils and our satisfied patients are our legacy.

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