Obituary

Fig. 1. Isn't champagne the greatest of drinks?

Michael Hackett 1931–1991

Michael Hackett died suddenly in the evening of January 18th whilst walking near Harley Street. Coronary bypass surgery in 1980 seemed to have given him an even greater zest for life and he appeared so fit and robust, almost indestructible, that his death came as a great shock to his many friends and colleagues around the world. Mike completed his medical training at St. Bartholomew's in London in 1957 and decided to pursue a career in general surgery. Whilst waiting for a senior registrar post he accepted a position as lecturer in surgery at the University of the South Pacific in Fiji for one year but the life and the enormously heavy work load was so much to his liking that he stayed on for a total of three and a half years. It was sometimes necessary, he recalled years later, to work with one of Hamilton Bailey's textbooks propped up beside him in the operating theatre and during this period he began to see and treat severe burns caused by accidents with kerosene cooking stoves which were widely used by the Fijians. In 1967 his wife Heather was accepted as a medical student at Bart's so the die was cast for a change in their lives.

As a student, Mike had been one of the few from his class to attend McIndoe's early morning lectures but it seems that it was only in Fiji that the idea of pursuing plastic surgery occurred to him. He wrote to Percy Jayes at Barts, asking for advice and shortly after arriving back in London, at the age of 37, he became registrar in Plastic Surgery to John Watson at the London Hospital and the German Hospital. He was an instant success and proceeded on to East Grinstead as Senior Registrar where he was in succession the Marks and the Rayne fellow.

John Watson, who invented the skin grafting knife which bears his name, was also on at East Grinstead where he was very much involved with the McIndoe Burns Centre. He was to have a considerable influence on Michael's career for there was an easy rapport and mutual respect between the two. Strangely John Watson was the first and Mike the last of the Marks fellows.

In 1973 he was appointed as a consultant in Plastic Surgery to the London Hospital and St. Andrew's Hospital, Billericay where he with 2 other colleagues was responsible for the establishment of the plastic surgery centre and the burns unit. He began his private practice in Harley Street and took a flat in the Barbican where friends, colleagues and junior staff rubbed shoulders in the memorable but sometimes forgotten luxury of his and Heather's generosity on the 39th floor, looking out across the lights of London.

Once firmly established he found a house near Billericay and he oscillated between this and the Barbican at break-neck speed with a stream of visitors and assistants struggling to keep up with him. He built a tennis court in the country and it was there in particular, that he indulged his fondness for 'Champagne tennis'. This was a variation on the standard game, devised by Mike and subject to a bewildering series of modifications as the game wore on. The fact that the players were obliged to drink a full glass of Champagne each time they changed ends, meant that most who have participated in this Olympian sport have no clear recollection of the experience.

Beside his strong commitment to the National Health Service and the teaching programme at the Billericay unit, he expended a good deal of his energy in raising money to complete the burns unit where his interest in both research and the day to day care of burns endeared him to patients and staff alike. Although he contributed a number of articles and chapters on plastic surgery and burns to the literature, I believe it is fair to say he preferred his patients to his pen.

He became an important and respected figure in the burns world, travelling widely and attracting many visitors. But he also was concerned about the need for an improved standard of teaching in aesthetic surgery. He lent his name and support to courses, in particular to those on rhinoplasty and perhaps it is for his work in this field that he would best like to be remembered.

Ultimately his large and very busy private practice, and the somewhat unorthodox manner in which it was conducted, necessitated the use of a number

of nursing homes and clinics scattered between London and Billericay. It was not unknown for him to make post-operative visits in the early hours of the morning, even if he was obliged to climb drain pipes to gain access to the wards. His old friend and mentor, John Watson, recalls a dinner party where, once the aperitifs (Champagne) were well underway, Mike produced a Jero-boam of Champagne, instructed a guest to open and dispense it, whilst he slipped out to do a quick private case, returning 'on time' for dinner.

Life was never dull with Michael. He appeared to thrive on a minimum of sleep whilst most normal mortals were simply unable to endure the pace of his daily routine. There are many apocryphal stories involving registrars delivering cold boxes of Champagne to railway stations for early morning breakfasts on trains, hectic dashes in taxis or his open sports car in all weathers to meet professional or social deadlines and brushes with the police.

Much as he liked to have friends and people about him, he was especially fond of slipping away, ostensibly to "recharge his batteries" in the company of his sister and brother-in-law, sometimes in Canada, sometimes in the Caribbean where he had a small hideaway.

Somehow he managed to find time to play an active role in many societies. He was for some years the British representative at the European Alpine Workshop where he always enlivened the meeting and distinguished himself as a courageous if circumspect skier.

1991 would have been a triumphant year for him as president of three important societies: the British Association of Aesthetic Surgeons, the Plastic Surgery section at the Royal Society of Medicine and the European Association of Plastic Surgeons.

This achievement which I imagine will not be repeated for a very long time, if ever, somehow exemplifies the way he chose to live. Inevitably there was a price to pay and it robbed our specialty of one of its most popular and colourful characters. His was a life lived to the very full, overflowing with warmth, enormous energy and above all generosity.

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When I heard about the untimely death of Michael Hackett, I was greatly saddened. Not only because he was a personal friend and that this was the year of his great success, having been elected as the President of three august societies, the most significant being the European Association of Plastic Surgery. An additional cause for sadness was the fact that he was a true European. He was completely "at home" with his friends whether it be in Strasbourg, Stuttgart, or Stockholm. He was the finest ambassador that British plastic surgery has had and he helped to dispel the "them and us" attitude. Hopefully, there will be someone who can at least replace him in that capacity. Certainly, there is no one who can emulate his enthusiasm, kindness, hospitality, and love of life. He will be missed by many for long years to come.

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