

Emeritus Professor Howard Bird

Colleagues will be sorry to learn of the death, on 29 January 2021, of Emeritus Professor Howard Bird, former Professor of Pharmacological Rheumatology. The following obituary has been contributed by friend and colleague Professor Philip Helliwell.

Howard trained in medicine at Cambridge and St Thomas' London, undertaking registrar jobs in general medicine and rheumatology at Bath before coming to Leeds as a research fellow in 1977. He was appointed Senior Registrar in 1978 and subsequently as a Lecturer for 6 years until his appointment as a Senior Lecturer in 1984. In 1991 he was made a Reader in Rheumatology and in 1995 a Professor of Pharmacological Rheumatology. From 2007 to retirement he was academic sub-dean.

Howard came to Leeds to work with Verna Wright. Verna had established a rheumatology unit with three main arms: rheumatology, rehabilitation and bioengineering and Howard was given the task of establishing a clinical pharmacology unit. This was situated at the Royal Bath Hospital in Harrogate, in a building next to the hospital, affectionately known as the 'Bird House' (it did serve that purpose in former times). Both Verna and Howard set up what they called their 'patient model system' where new pharmaceuticals could be tested, with treatment arms of, usually, about 25 patients! Subjects were recruited from the adjacent Royal Bath Hospital by Jackie Hill and Patricia Le Gallez. Howard, Jackie and Patricia pioneered specialist rheumatology nursing, publishing a (sadly now no longer available) textbook on multidisciplinary care. He was aware of the lack of formal rheumatology education for nurses and set up and also taught on the first short, accredited English National Board course for rheumatology nurses in the UK in the 1980s. Participants on this course came from the UK, Europe and as far afield as Australia. Howard set up the first international conference for rheumatology nurses and health professionals in the 1980s and this format was then taken on by EU rheumatologists and their teams.

Howard was an inspiring teacher at all levels, and supervised numerous postgraduate students with great care and commitment, whilst still managing to publish nearly 400 original scientific papers, as well as numerous chapters in books, and to sit on University bodies, such as the Central Data Monitoring Committee of the Faculty of Medicine and Health (which he has Chaired for the past two years). Outside the University, and particularly given his activities in pharmacological management, he has been in great demand upon committees and boards, including several Chair positions – for example data safety monitoring boards and the West Leeds Research Ethics Committee (of which he was Vice-Chair between 2005 and 2009). He was also a member of the Drugs and Therapeutics' Committee in Harrogate, member of the Arthritis & Rheumatism Council Education Sub-Committee, member of the RCP Special Committee on Rheumatology and was Editor of the British Journal of Rheumatology from 1991-97.

Howard, in addition to his expertise in clinical pharmacology, was a leader in the field of joint hypermobility, co-authoring, with Rodney Grahame and Peter Beighton, what is still the major textbook in the field. This interest complemented his work with performing artists who developed musculoskeletal pain, and, after retirement, he continued his work at the Northern School of Contemporary Dance in Leeds. Howard was an accomplished pianist, which was a way he was able to 'wind down'. He was mild mannered with an excellent sense of humour: no-one will forget the raucous laughter that used to emanate from his office on a Wednesday morning, during his weekly meeting with Verna Wright. Howard was unflappable, a good friend and mentor, and an excellent colleague.

Once the details of the funeral are known, the flag on the Parkinson Building will be flown at half-mast in Professor Bird's memory.