

Hilda Tracy

1927–2010



Hilda Tracy

Hilda Tracy was a longstanding Member of The Physiological Society, who performed seminal work on the isolation and characterization of the acid-secretory hormone gastrin, the first gastrointestinal hormone to be sequenced. She was born on 14 October 1927, and grew up in Birkenhead, one of a family of four children. After leaving school she worked at the University of Liverpool, ultimately in the research laboratory of Rod Gregory. Encouraged to enrol as a university undergraduate, Hilda took a degree in medicine which she accomplished with distinction, winning several medals and prizes.

In 1958 Hilda joined the academic staff of the physiology department in Liverpool and continued to work in partnership with Rod

Gregory until his death in 1990. In the late 1950s they had attempted to repeat the work of Simon Komorov, who was the first to report a histamine-free, gastrin-rich stomach extract. However, the method proved unreliable so Gregory and Tracy devised a whole new extraction and purification procedure that utilized weekly, hundreds of pig stomachs collected from a local abattoir. These heroic efforts culminated in the resolution of two pure peptides in 1962 that were subsequently sequenced as two heptadecapeptides differing in the presence or absence of a sulphate group on the solitary tyrosine residue. They continued to isolate gastrin for many years and provide it to countless collaborators worldwide who were keen to study the biology of this new peptide. Their scientific partnership was very much an equal one, a fact not always appreciated at the time – perhaps due in part to the then prevailing perception of the place of women in science. Hilda played a lead role in the structure-activity studies on gastrin which revealed the unexpected finding that the carboxyl-terminal tetrapeptide amide possessed the full biological properties of the intact peptide. It was also she who hit upon the idea that gastrin might be the active factor in clinical cases of patients with intractable peptic ulcer and an endocrine tumour of the pancreas, first described by Zollinger and Ellison in 1955. Gregory and Tracy were subsequently able to isolate the active factor from pancreatic Zollinger-Ellison tumours, showing it to be identical to gastrin from the stomach and thus laying the

foundation for gastrin radioimmunoassay to become a reliable diagnostic test for Zollinger-Ellison tumours. Hilda was rigorous in the pursuit of scientific excellence, and forthright in discussion, but she did not devote much energy to self-promotion, which is perhaps why outside the main players in her field, she remained rather less well known than was justified.

Hilda was a popular lecturer and tutor; students recognized in her someone with a thorough understanding of the subject and the all too rare ability to make it both accessible and interesting. She was a valued member of the physiology department, independently minded with a practical and common sense approach to problem solving. Hilda was always happy to impart advice and help to junior colleagues and was a ready and fierce supporter of the underdog. She was unwavering in her sensitivity to injustices to students or junior researchers and reliably robust and even outspoken in their defence.

During the early part of her career, Hilda married and brought up two children, and she remained devoted to her family. After her retirement in 1993 she was able to spend more time on her lifelong passion for her garden and the countryside; she also developed a keen interest in painting. Hilda remained fit and active long into her retirement, walking her dog for two hours every day right up until her final illness which she bore with characteristic dignity.

Rod Dimaline

The Society also regrets to announce the deaths of:

Sir Gabriel Horn

was Emeritus Professor of Natural Sciences (Zoology) at Cambridge University. He was 84 and was elected a Member of The Society in 1963.

Stephen O'Neill

worked in the Manchester Cardiovascular Group at the University of Manchester, and was elected a Member in 1990.

Yves Laporte

one of the most eminent physiologists of the 20th century, who was elected an Honorary Member of the Society in 1984.

Full obituaries can be found on The Society website at:

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