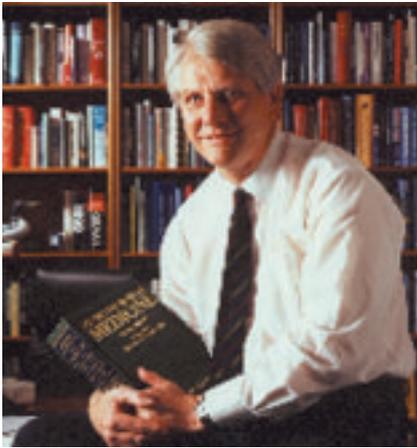


## David Horrobin

1939 – 2003



David Horrobin, who died of lymphoma on 1 April was a ‘full-time’ physiologist for only the early part of his career. Because of this, I suspect his name may be less well-known to Society members than to people in medicine or the pharmaceutical business. However, he remained an active member of the Society throughout his working life, a testament to his lifelong search for new ideas, particularly in the area of research into polyunsaturated fatty acids, and latterly into schizophrenia.

David was a true ‘renaissance man’. He was, *inter alia*, scientist – and one who experimented on himself at that – teacher, author, journal founder and editor, publisher, research charity president, entrepreneur and CEO. More than enough for several lifetimes – and I have probably omitted several other roles. He was also someone who spoke his mind – frequently and eloquently – and rather enjoyed a good argument.

The bare facts of David’s career are remarkable enough. He won a scholarship to Oxford to read Medicine and, following clinical and research training in London, became Professor of Medical Physiology in Nairobi at the age of 31. From there he moved to Newcastle as Reader in Physiology in 1972, and to Montreal as Professor of Medicine in 1975. In

1979 he left academia and began the second major phase of his career when he set up the Efamol Research Institute in Nova Scotia, which spawned the biotechnology company Scotia Pharmaceuticals in 1987. David ran Scotia until leaving the company after a boardroom struggle in 1997 to form Laxdale Ltd, which he ran until his death.

I got to know David well in the 70s during three years he spent in the Newcastle Physiology Department and subsequently when he persuaded me to found and edit the journal *Cell Calcium*. Characteristics of his that most stick in my mind are his intelligence, his unflinching enthusiasm for new ideas and his generosity. David was always trying to do something new, and was never content to stand still. He was also an excellent teacher and inspirer of others, always ready to spend time with people to get the point across.

David was also, needless to say, prolific. When he came to work in Newcastle he was already the author of a classic textbook for medical students, written during his time in Nairobi, and of several other books besides, including a noted guidebook to East Africa! He published a huge number of articles and several more books, culminating in his recent book *The Madness of Adam and Eve: Did Schizophrenia Shape Humanity?* (Bantam Press, 2001), which was short-listed for the Aventis Science Book Prize the following year.

Throughout his career David was always ready to argue his ideas in print, whether scientific or in what one might call the ‘politics’ of refereeing and funding. This outspokenness meant that some in the scientific and medical establishment viewed him as an irritant. But it is David’s later career as a pharmaceutical scientist-entrepreneur that generated the most controversy, both in his lifetime and beyond it. Scotia promoted polyunsaturated fatty acids (PUFAs) and products containing them,

notably evening primrose oil, as potential remedies for many conditions, and funded both basic and clinical research into their actions. Only a few of these potential uses have resulted in accepted treatments, which has led some commentators to view David’s work at Scotia with a slightly jaundiced eye – somewhat harshly, I feel, given the enormous difficulties in bringing new medicines to fruition. Although Scotia is no longer trading, a search on Medline reveals that research into gamma-linolenic acid continues – with nearly 100 papers published in each of the last three years – and the importance of PUFAs in physiology and medicine cannot be disputed. As a tireless promoter of research into PUFAs, David Horrobin deserves to take some of the credit for this.

Numerous obituaries of David Horrobin appeared in the national and specialist press. Several are worth reading, notably those in the *Times*, *The Scotsman*, and *The Lancet*, but the one that has attracted the most attention was a bizarre, negative, and deeply ill-judged one which appeared in the *British Medical Journal*, and which caused considerable hurt to David’s family. What the author of this hatchet-job had against David is hard to fathom, but she unwittingly ended up providing him with a rather special memorial. Within days of the obituary appearing, over 100 people – friends, family, former colleagues and other researchers, or just plain interested readers – had written in to the *BMJ* to reject her verdict on David and, in many cases, share their reminiscences of this exceptional person. This response exceeded in volume the correspondence produced by any other piece the *BMJ* has ever printed. The letters, which can be read on the *BMJ* website, make fascinating reading, and give a real sense of the man, his life and work, and above all his gift for inspiring others.

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