

Piers C.G. Nye (1946-2021)

Emeritus University Lecturer in Physiology and Emeritus Fellow of Balliol College, Oxford

Piers Charles Gillespie Nye came up from Marlborough College to read Agriculture at Oxford in 1965. He moved to UC Davis for his Ph.D to study under the eminent avian physiologist Ray Burger from 1969-1977, where he won the prestigious Carlsson Prize. He returned to Oxford in 1977, funded by the Medical Research Council, and later the Wellcome Trust from 1983, where he worked initially with R.W. Torrance before running the lab (Room 3, in the University Laboratory of Physiology). He played a dominant role on the international stage in our understanding of the physiology of the arterial chemoreceptors between 1984-1989, before he switched his interest to pulmonary hypoxic vasoconstriction.

Piers was made a College Lecturer in Physiology at Balliol College 1984-87, and then a University Lecturer in Physiology and Tutorial Fellow in Physiological Sciences at Balliol from 1991-2011. From 1993 until 2011, he coordinated the Physiological Sciences undergraduate course, where he was a passionate advocate. He continued his teaching beyond his retirement in 2011 to lecture in physiology to Human Sciences students and gained a loyal following.

Throughout his time in Oxford from 1978 onwards, Piers actively promoted access to the University by state school candidates, especially those from schools with little or no history of applying to Oxbridge, speaking at official Oxford University Access Events. In 2015, he was recognised with a Teaching Excellence Lifetime Achievement Award from the University of Oxford Medical Sciences Division for his ‘high quality and sustained commitment to education demonstrated throughout his career.’

In recent years, Piers remained a champion of his former students’ achievements – for DPAG’s campaign marking the 2020-21 centenary of women’s full membership of Oxford University, “Women in Physiology, Anatomy and Genetics”, he contributed by far the most nominations to highlight the successes of the diverse women he has taught over the years.

Many of my colleagues and associates have written to me and wished to share their memories of Piers and his contributions to teaching and research. A fuller account can be found at <https://www.dpag.ox.ac.uk/news/dr-piers-charles-gillespie-nye>

“It’s sad to think I won’t see Piers again. Piers and I shared an office in Ray Burger’s lab at UC Davis those many years ago — he was a friend, a good scientist, and a true character. I’m sure we all have Piers stories to tell. My favourite goes like this:

I received a review of a manuscript submitted to Respiration Physiology that said, amongst other things, that “The paper was written in a conversational, almost 19th Century style. I half expected to be told that, 'at that moment Prof Barcroft entered the lab and we decided to retire to the local public house for a beer and a pilchard sandwich'.” Although I did not know at the time who wrote the review, I considered it complimentary (my colleagues were shocked). The next year in a lecture at an ATS meeting Piers passed me a note “Care to go for a beer and pilchard sandwich?” (*Robert Banzett, Associate Professor of Medicine, Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, Harvard*)

“A sad loss indeed. I'll always remember how he fought the corner for non-medical physiology, which at times shrank to a level where someone wanting to economise might have struck against it - not least when it was seen as outmoded by the fashion for molecular genetics as an end rather than as the means. That we now have a strong physiology course owes a lot to his campaigning.” (*Stephen Goss, Emeritus Fellow and Tutor in Medicine*)

“Indeed, so, Stephen. What Bayliss called "General Physiology" needs to be restored in biology. We owe a lot to what Piers defended.” (*Denis Noble, Emeritus Professor of Cardiovascular Physiology*)

Piers was certainly a one off, the likes we will probably never see again in the Department. He was passionate about social justice and took an active role in the university and wider international community as a member of the Physiological Society, Balliol Medical Society, Amnesty International Jewish Voice for Peace, and Greenpeace. But it was his dedication to his undergraduates who adored him, and his pride in those who had worked with him in Room 3, that set him apart. He loathed pretence, dressed down, had an infectious smile and wicked sense of humour. When I joined Room 3, it was a little powerhouse of activity and fun – a fantastic environment to be a part of, which he created, although it failed every aspect of health and safety based on today's standards.

Piers was an outstanding experimentalist and I was fortunate to experience his joint supervision of my D.Phil in the mid 1980's. His cat carotid body experiments went long into the night, and donation of other material from the cat to his colleagues (T. Powell and G. Cooper) underpinned several major advances. He worked long hours, survived on Mrs Jones pies with baked beans from the café, black coffee and Marlboro fags. If experiments went well there was always time for a pint at one of the many Jericho pubs or a visit to *Al Shami* the next day.

A champion of the discipline whose legacy is defined by those he trained and tutored. Indeed, he was of a generation who understood what it meant to be a tutor. I already miss him. A great loss. (*D.J. Paterson Oxford*).