



John Orr Remembered

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A tribute to John A. Orr LDS, RFPS (1936)1 HDD (1942), FDS Glasgow (1967), FDS Edinburgh (1971),

1914-1971

More frequently, or so it would seem, I find myself nowadays looking back down the years that have gone and with Wordsworth's "inward eye" reviewing the many friends, colleagues and mentors whose influences shaped my dental career. Fortunate indeed are those whose education is in the hands of dedicated, caring and inspiring teachers. We who

were undergraduates in the late 1950s had the benefit of being taught by many such men, one of whom, John Orr, was the first consultant oral surgeon to be appointed to the oral surgery department of Glasgow Dental Hospital.

John would have been among the first year of dental students to study in the new Glasgow Dental Hospital and School which, when it opened in 1932, was probably the most up-to-date purpose-built dental school in the UK. On qualifying in 1936 he took over the practice of a recently deceased uncle, also named John Alexander Orr, at 4 Corunna Street in Finnieston. He soon opened his own practice at 92 Calder Street on the South side of the city. In 1938 he joined the staff of the Glasgow Dental Hospital as a senior house surgeon, succeeding Joseph Ryan. At that time the hospital opened for patients at 2 p.m. when a long queue would form in Renfrew Street. New patients were recorded in a ledger and then examined by a house surgeon, who would make an initial diagnosis and allocate them to a student or to a particular department. At 6.45 p.m. the ringing of a hand-bell in the ground-floor corridor announced the impending closure of all departments at 7 p.m. I am indebted to the charming Jessie Orr, for her account of her husband working in his practice each morning then leaving to start his duties at the dental hospital at 2 p.m. He would return home for a quick meal before continuing to work in the practice until around 10 p.m. Somehow he found time to study for a Higher Dental Diploma, which he gained in 1942.

With the start of the National Health Service in 1948 John Orr became a full-time member of the dental hospital staff and was appointed consultant oral surgeon. He sold his practice in the following year. Although I had heard of his fine reputation, I first encountered John Orr when, with my fellow-students, I began my clinical training in his department. My first impression was of a strict but kindly man, formal in manner but not forbidding. He was well aware of the responsibility of his position and the fact that as far as the dental hospital was concerned, with regard to problems of a dental or oral surgery nature, the buck stopped with him.

His staff in 1957 consisted of Willie Browne and Tom Kennedy as registrars, with Norman Colquhoun and Kolbjom Urbye as house officers. Later Willie and Tom became consultant oral surgeons in Inverness and Ayr respectively, Norman served as Chief Dental Officer for Scotland and Kolbjorn is a retired orthodontic consultant in Oslo.

After graduation I was fortunate to be accepted as a house officer in John Orr's department and began my oral surgery training under his care. I also began to develop a deep respect and affection for him which was shared by his other members of staff including a medical secretary and staff nurses Catherine Henderson and Jean McCall. These ladies served under Sister Patterson, a formidable lady and a stem disciplinarian but one who, once one had proved to be worthy, became a splendid helper and friend. To be invited to Sister's Christmas party was to know that one had "arrived" in the dental hospital social scene! The festivities were held in an annexe of the oral surgery department and were presided over by John in a merry and relaxed mood. They always culminated in a short speech in which he thanked his staff for their help over the previous year. John Orr was not a "natural" public speaker and had none of the average politician's glib fluency. Like the man himself his speeches were direct, honest and sincere, leavened with a simple but kindly humour which was never deployed at the expense of others. Recognising that his position would involve him in a fair amount of speech-making of both a professional and a social nature, John characteristically set about improving his ability in this field. He became a successful member of the Toastmasters' Club and when he got to his feet he was always a man worth hearing. One example of his unsophisticated humour comes to mind. A former classmate, the late P. J. Travers, who had a ready wit, came round the corner of the oral surgery corridor and collided with John, causing him to drop a bundle of patients' casualty cards. Paddy picked up and regrouped the cards and handed them back with an apology, adding: "Oh well you didn't have a very good hand there anyway, Mr Orr." About an hour later, in the main clinic, John approached Paddy and presented his highly skilled hands to him. "Tell me, Travers," he began. "Just what exactly do you find wrong with my hands?"

John Orr's workload was enormous and because he made himself responsible for every patient who came through his department he was reluctant to delegate responsibility for their care. Junior staff in his department were carefully trained to his standards and were given detailed oral and written instructions on what was expected of them. No junior was ever thrown in at the deep end and expected to get on with it. John took his time in assessing one's ability, so when the time came to "go solo" one was quietly proud and confident.

He could have saved himself considerable stress had he been willing to compromise but if there was any doubt about the difficulty of an operation he would tend to do it himself. He taught that it was a privilege to be in a position to treat a patient, a fact that I forced myself to remember on the days when the queues at Casualty Receiving seemed endless. John was always willing to help general practitioner colleagues with their difficult cases, and as Tom Brown Henderson wrote in his history of the Glasgow Dental Hospital and School, many had reason to be grateful to him for the advice and direct help that he provided. As well as his out-patient clinics at the dental hospital he had beds for his in-patients at both the Royal Infirmary and Stobhill Hospital, where

he treated more difficult cases requiring oral surgery. At the Royal he worked in collaboration with Dr A. Stuart Douglas to provide dental treatment for patients with haemophilia.

As well as his direct clinical service he used the facilities provided at the new dental hospital to set in place a system of reporting on pathology specimens and drug sensitivities. The demand for this service went from almost non-existence in 1947 to a steady trickle in 1948 and then to numbers that led to the formation of the prestigious departments of oral pathology and bacteriology that exist in the dental hospital today, thanks to his foresight and organisational ability.

John Orr's contribution to his profession was recognised by his peers. In 1958-59 he was elected president of the Glasgow Odontological Society, of which he later became honorary vice-president and then honorary president. He became president of the West of Scotland branch of the British Dental Association in 1963 and gave his presidential address, "Some Dental Observations", in the same year.

He was an elder of Newton Mearns Church and a captain of the 790, Glasgow Company of the Boys Brigade. Surprisingly, he found time for recreation and was a keen sailor, delighting in his boat, *Orrkid* (what else!). He was also no mean athlete. I recall a staff v. students cricket match one sunny day when the student at the crease hit a fine stroke which ran past me, well on its way for a four. I was making up my mind whether to pursue the ball or not, a figure shot past me, recovered the moving ball, and returned it to the wicket, to the consternation of the batsman, who just made it to the crease. My admiration for my consultant boss rose a few more notches.

John was also a skilled golfer and a member of the Western Dental Golf Club. My old friend and ex-partner Archie Whitelaw reminds me of a documented account of a meeting of the WDGC at Irvine Bogside. Patty Berg, the famous American lady professional golfer, was about to give a demonstration of the golf swing on the 1st tee when John emerged from the clubhouse to join some friends. Miss Berg greeted him like a long-lost friend and he finished up acting as a model for her "clinic." He confessed to thoroughly enjoying the experience.

Jessie Orr donated a silver cup in memory of her husband. John wanted younger staff to meet their older colleagues in general and hospital practice, in a social setting. The John Orr trophy goes some way to achieving this, and the competitions are always much enjoyed by the contestants.

The pressure on John Orr's professional life eased somewhat with the appointment of Mr J. Aird Russell as consultant oral surgeon to the dental hospital, the Western Infirmary and the Royal Hospital for Sick Children, Yorkhill, in 1958.

In 1966 Mr Hugh D. Campbell was appointed consultant oral surgeon to the Victoria Infirmary, the Southern General Hospital, and other hospitals in the South of Glasgow, with clinical and teaching duties at the dental hospital. Hugh, who had been a student and junior member of staff under John Orr, continued the provision of training for students and junior staff as well as excellent seminars for GP colleagues.

In my time as a permanent member of the oral surgery department of Glasgow I continued to learn from John Orr and to admire his diagnostic ability. His health was beginning to fail, but he was as kindly, honest, and forthright as ever. Shortly before

his retiral he required some oral surgical treatment and asked if I would undertake it for him. It was typical of him that he considered the protocol involved. "I suppose," he said, "that as I am the senior consultant in the department I should ask one of my senior colleagues to do this; however I have considered it carefully and would like you to do it for me." I don't think he realised just how very proud he made me by that request. It was a great privilege to serve my old teacher and friend. One that I shall always remember.

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