Obituary

Dr James Sharp, BSc, MD, FRCP, 1919–1999

Dr James Sharp, Consultant Rheumatologist at Withington Hospital, Manchester and the Devonshire Royal Hospital, Buxton, died from cardiac failure on 26 December 1999. Jim, or Jimmy as he was universally known, was born in Bolton, Lancashire on 23 March 1919, the son of a cotton mill manager. His early years were spent in Glossop, Derbyshire, and Boothstown, Lancashire, and he attended the local grammar schools in Glossop and Leigh before graduating BSc in 1940 from the University of Manchester. From 1941–1943 he completed his medical training at Rochester, New York, as a Rockefeller Medical Student, qualifying MD Rochester, MRCS, LRCP, MB, ChB, Manchester in 1943.

He was commissioned with the RAMC and served with the Somerset Light Infantry in India from 1944–1947.

On returning to Manchester, Jimmy gave serious consideration to a career in haematology and from 1947 to 1951 was Registrar then Senior Registrar in the Department of Haematology at the Manchester Royal Infirmary.

A change of career course followed with the development of the new Rheumatism Research Centre in Manchester, and after J. H. Kellgren was appointed to the first UK Chair of Rheumatology in Manchester he was joined in 1952 by Jimmy, who became Lecturer in the new unit before being promoted in 1955 to Senior Lecturer and Assistant Clinical Director of the Rheumatism Research Centre. In 1961 he was appointed Consultant Rheumatologist at Withington, Manchester, and the Devonshire Royal.

Jimmy was responsible for organizing one of the first spondylitis clinics and his research on ankylosing spondylitis was the basis of his MD, which was awarded with commendation by the University of Manchester in 1955.

He gave the Heberden Round in 1965 under the magnificent dome of the Devonshire Royal Hospital. Under his theme of central arthritis, he discussed the clinical and radiological features of patients with axial arthritis, presaging the concept of spondyloarthritides that was to be developed in later years by the Leeds group.

His close collaboration with John Ball on the clinicopathological features of the rheumatoid cervical spine resulted in numerous publications and was reviewed in his presidential address to the Section of Medicine of the Manchester Medical Society in 1975.

Jimmy’s reputation for clinical thoroughness was well merited. He had the uncanny knack of finding physical signs—from carotid bruits to pericardial rubs—that had been embarrassingly missed by his colleagues and senior registrars. He devised his own highly individual 0–4 scoring system for clinical examination, and few patients escaped an out-patient visit without having all their joints graded. Jimmy was never observed to have lunch and a morning ward round would continue until it was time to walk over to the afternoon out-patient clinic. If the clinical day often seemed long to his senior registrarst it was even longer for Jimmy himself, as he would invariably see all his in-patients at the Devonshire every evening before returning home.

Jimmy’s hands-on approach meant he found it difficult to delegate clinical responsibility, but his senior registrars were allowed to manage their own patients, and ward rounds with Jimmy at the foot of the bed would often feel like a weekly membership examination. Working with Jimmy was a unique experience which

Accepted 30 March 2000.
enhanced the clinical competence of all those with whom he came into contact, and there is a generation of rheumatologists who will always be grateful for the experience gained while working in his unit.

Jimmy was a very private individual, but an insight into a different persona emerged with the annual Christmas Show at the Devonshire, where his colleagues relied heavily on his ability to play the piano by ear. He had a love of jazz and was enthusiastic about motor racing, and for many years went to the Monaco Grand Prix.

At the time of his retirement Jimmy was presented with a set of golf clubs—an unusual gift for someone who had never played golf before, but his total devotion to medicine was soon replaced by an equal obsession for a new sport and he became a regular and well-respected member of his local golf club at Chapel. At times his presence on the golf course was interrupted by attacks of gout, but he was reluctant to take allopurinol, fearing it would upset the control of the anticoagulants he took for chronic atrial fibrillation and hypertensive arterial disease. It seemed a curious twist of fate when a retired rheumatologist was admitted to his former hospital at the Devonshire with chronic tophaceous gout.

Jimmy met his wife Joan at the local tennis club in 1939 and they were married in 1944. He was very much a family man and, despite his long working hours, was extremely devoted to Joan and the boys. Jimmy is survived by Joan, his two sons, and two grandchildren.

J. Marks