Obituary

Myrddin Evans: A Gentleman and a Founder of the Medical Council on Alcohol (MCA) and its Journal

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Myrddin Evans
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1922–2017

The Medical Council on Alcohol (MCA) and its journal, now Alcohol and Alcoholism, have lost a founder member of the journal and of the Council, a previous Vice President, a great proponent of alcohol and alcoholism research both in this country and internationally, and above all, a true gentleman of the highest moral calibre. Dr Myrddin Evans passed away peacefully in hospital on January 11, 2017 after a brief attack of pneumonia.

Born on September 9, 1922, Myrddin was the fourth child of Rachel and Thomas Evans, the post master, in the village of Cefneithin, Carmarthenshire. He attended primary school there and won a state scholarship to the Gwendraeth grammar school. He spent a year studying art at Swansea College and started studying medicine at the Cardiff Medical School a year or so after the start of the second world war. He applied to join the Royal Air Force (RAF), but was told that they would prefer to take him as a qualified doctor. After qualifying, he joined up as a medical officer towards the end of the war. He met his wife to be, Marjorie, while serving in the RAF. They married in 1950 in a very happy partnership lasting over 64 years until her death in 2015.

After a spell at the Cardiff Royal Infirmary, Myrddin moved to Runwell Psychiatric Hospital in Essex, caring for soldiers suffering from traumatic war experiences. He then moved to the Middlesex Hospital in London as senior registrar in general medicine. Because of health problems related to lung function, his peers advised him to take up a physically less-demanding branch of medicine. Given his experience at Runwell, he opted for psychiatry.

In 1960, Dr Evan was appointed the first consultant in addiction in Wales based at Whitchurch Hospital in Cardiff. He continued in this role as Director of the Addiction Unit, locally known as the Adfer Unit (adfer in Welsh = rebirth) until his retirement in 1987. He quickly established his Unit as the specialist regional centre, trained many junior doctors, who became consultants in various parts of the UK, provided opportunities for local general practitioners to gain first hand and direct experience in treatment and management of alcohol- and drug-related cases in a hospital environment, and attracted visitors from various parts of the world, from experts in the addiction field to politicians. Among others, his famous Unit was visited by a UK Health Secretary, the Right Honourable Kenneth Clarke, MP, a Queensland’s Minister of Health and the late Diana Princess of Wales. Dr Evans founded the Addiction Research Foundation for Wales in the 1970s to support research and treatment, and the Youth Forum in the 1980s to promote education and awareness among school children of the dangers of alcohol and drugs. In subsequent years, he was part of the government commission into the mental health and welfare of prison inmates and travelled widely making assessments and reporting back.

Dr Evans was a major figure in the addiction field at the international level. He hosted in 1970 the conference (Institute) of the International Council on Alcohol and Addictions (ICAA) and continued to play an active role in this organization. In particular, he was a major proponent of biomedical research on alcoholism and in 1972, the first biennial symposium of the newly formed Section of Biomedical Research on Alcoholism within the ICAA was held in Amsterdam. This symposium, under the chairmanship of the Section Head, the late Milton Gross of Downstate Medical Center in Brooklyn, New York, was attended by world experts in alcohol research. The Section continued its biennial activity on a regular basis and published its proceedings in the prestigious series Advances in Experimental Medicine and Biology. In 1978, a group of scientists headed by Boris Tabakoff (then Section Chairman) and Jon-Pierre von Wartburg organized a meeting in Cheb,
Switzerland, to consider the formation of an International Society for Biomedical Research on Alcoholism (ISBRA) that would be independent of ICAA. Myrddin was part of these discussions and was in favour of the formation of such an entity, but wanted the new Society to have close ties with the ICAA. The hope was that the two groups would be complementary and serve both the practitioners and the research communities. Myrddin suggested that the initial meeting of ISBRA be held in the same locale as the ICAA meeting and joint sessions could be organized. Interestingly, the next meeting of ICAA was scheduled for Cardiff and the fledgling ISBRA also with Myrddin’s and Abdulla Badawy’s help organized its meeting to be held in Cardiff in 1980. Myrddin headed the local organizers and produced a memorable event. The scientific programme featured the best researchers in the alcohol area and a lecture by the Nobel Laureate Julius Axelrod was the highlight of the meeting. However, Myrddin’s hopes and the hopes of the other leaders of ISBRA for interactions with ICAA during this meeting never materialized. Myrddin continued to try to have the two groups develop fruitful interactions but to no avail. Irrespective of this outcome, the first meeting of ISBRA in Cardiff clearly established the ability of the Society to be an outstanding platform for bringing together and disseminating the best of alcohol-related science and Myrddin’s efforts were central to that accomplishment. ISBRA now has three regional Societies as part of its organization and its membership consists of scientists from 23 countries.

His consultant contract in Cardiff allowed Myrddin to carry out biochemical research, in which he had a strong interest. This was facilitated by the presence of a research laboratory at Whitchurch Hospital. The City of Cardiff Mental Hospital had the distinction of supporting and promoting biochemical research shortly after its foundation early in the 20th century. The famous ‘Whitchurch Lab’ was home to two successive research groups, the first headed by J H Quastel, FRS, during the 1920s–1940s and the second by D Richter, FRS, during the 1940s–1960s. Dr Richter headed the Medical Research Council’s Neuropsychiatric Research Unit at Whitchurch, which was moved to Carshalton, Surrey in 1966. Myrddin Evans reactivated the laboratory and together with one of us (A.A.-B.B.) continued its research activity and established its world reputation in tryptophan research. Dr Evans published widely in many journals, notably the Biochemical Journal, British Journal of Pharmacology and Alcohol and Alcoholism and its predecessors.

Dr Evans was a founder of the MCA and its journal. He was a member of the first Executive Committee of the MCA at the time of its inception and continued to serve on this and the journal and finance and general purpose committees until the early 2000s. He became a Vice Chairman of the MCA in 1985 and Vice President in 1986. The MCA journal owes much of its current status to the earlier efforts and dedication of Dr Evans as Assistant Editor to the Founding Editor the late Dr Herbert Chalke and as Editor from 1977 to 1980. Prior to and during his editorship, Dr Evans steered the journal in the direction of biomedical research by inviting reviews and encouraging independent submissions. By 1980, the journal became known as Alcohol and Alcoholism and recognized as a multidisciplinary medium for biomedical researchers, thereby facilitating its later adoption by the newly formed European Society for Biomedical Research on Alcoholism (ESBRA) as its official journal.

Dr Evans retired to Brecon. He was a keen walker and angler, frequently fly fishing in the Taf river and also a keen gardener; his favourites being roses of all colours and forms. He was also keen on water colour painting throughout his life and painted many of his own. In 2008, he suffered a stroke, but made a good recovery. He leaves a daughter, Helen, a son-in-law, two grandsons and two great grandchildren.