Obituary

Professor William V. Shaw

On 30 July 2018 William V. Shaw (Bill) passed away peacefully in Alexandria, Virginia, USA. He was 85. A native of Philadelphia, Bill spent most of his research career in the UK, predominantly in the Department of Biochemistry at the University of Leicester. The main thrust of Bill's academic work was the antibiotic resistance enzyme chloramphenicol acetyl transferase (CAT), while his biotech work centred on the discovery of new antibiotics.

Bill was an oddity in 1970s UK science since he was a clinically-qualified biochemist with a strong interest in interdisciplinary research. After graduating with a degree in Chemistry from Williams College, a liberal arts college in Williamstown, Massachusetts, Bill studied medicine at Columbia Medical School in New York. He completed his residency at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital where he witnessed first-hand the amazing curative properties of antibiotics. About this time Bill published his first research papers on animal metabolism with Donald F. Tapley. After a stint at NIH working with Earl Stadman, Bill returned to Columbia where his work on CAT began in earnest. He moved to the University of Miami to teach biochemistry in the late 1960s where a chance encounter with Brian Hartley, then at the LMB, convinced him to take a sabbatical in Cambridge. Thereafter, Bill's career was cemented in the UK. He applied for and got a newly established chair in Medical Biochemistry at the University of Leicester.

Bill arrived in Leicester in the autumn of 1974. Although not long in the UK, Bill was in many ways already anglicised, especially with respect to his wry sense of humour which was at times unnervingly British. When introducing Bill, the Vice Chancellor of the University Sir Fraser Noble effused that he “had come to Leicester via Miami” and then proceeded to ask why he had done so. Bill’s instant rejoinder was “Vice-chancellor, it must have been for the weather and the money!”

In 1976 Bill replaced Hans (now Sir Hans) Kornberg as head of department, a position he shared with Bill Brammar for the next 18 years; they took on the role in alternate years. The ‘two Bills’ arrangement worked remarkably well. Through his smooth charm and unerring ability to entice stars to Leicester, Bill S. drove developments in structural biology (both NMR and crystallography) and molecular biophysics.

Bill will be particularly remembered for his caring and supportive nature, especially with young academics and researchers, but also for his boundless enthusiasm. “Talk to anyone about Bill at that time and they will tell you about his remarkable energy, as well as his vision” (Jeremy Derrick, (University of Manchester) one of Bill’s postdocs). After more than 20 years in academia Bill ventured into biotech, forming a spin-out company focused on developing antibiotics targeting multidrug resistant bacteria. He recruited collaborators and acquired start-up funding (Merlin Ventures); in 1997, PanTherix was born. In 1999, PanTherix relocated to Glasgow, where it acquired >£10M investment and at its peak employed 34 staff. Bill acted as its CEO until he stepped down in 2000.

On retiring from science, Bill returned to the US to live in Deer Isle, Maine. He spent time teaching chemistry at the local high school, where he raised funds for a new science laboratory and from where he inspired the next generation of scientists. Although typically busy (he learnt how to build boats, became a keen sailor and even set up his own market garden), his interest in UK science remained undiminished, maintaining links with PanTherix and the Lister Institute.

Bill Shaw is survived by his younger brother John, five children, Lisa, Scott, Thomas, Katherine and Joanna, and nine grandchildren.

Colin Kleanthous, Department of Biochemistry, University of Oxford (PhD student, 1980); Bill Primrose, Ithaka Life Sciences (co-founder of PanTherix); Ian Eperon, Department of Molecular & Cell Biology, University of Leicester (Lecturer in Biochemistry, 1984).

References: