

Michael Wakelam (15 July 1955–31 March 2020)



Our friend and colleague, Michael Wakelam, the Director of the Babraham Institute, passed away from respiratory complications arising from suspected Covid-19 infection on 31 March 2020. Michael's career spanned more than 40 years and 200 papers, during which he made many friends and was heavily involved in scientific leadership. He was also a great supporter of the Biochemical Society and its journals.

Michael obtained his BSc in Medical Biochemistry (1977) and PhD in Biochemistry (1980) from the University of Birmingham, having worked on the expression of hepatic glucokinase. At Birmingham Michael also met his life-long partner, Jane Fensome, who later became his wife. Together they moved to the University of Konstanz where Michael undertook a post-doc with Dirk Pette, studying inositol lipid turnover during myoblast fusion; this shift towards signal transduction was prompted by Bob Michell's hypotheses around inositol lipid turnover, and Bob and Michael remained firm friends. In 1983, Michael moved to Imperial College London, as a Beit Memorial Fellow, studying the RAS oncoproteins with the late Chris Marshall and Allan Hall at the Institute of Cancer Research.

In 1985, Michael became a lecturer in biochemistry at the University of Glasgow. Here, Michael's lab discovered that RAS could regulate a phospholipase C, though the full significance of this was not recognized until 15 years later, when PLC- ϵ was identified as a RAS effector. Michael's lab, together with those of Miles Houslay and Graeme Milligan, was vibrant and exciting, with a strong work ethic; experiments ran 7 days a week and into the evening. Results were discussed as they came off the scintillation counter, and digested over beers on Byres Road. Michael's excitement for science was infectious and several significant scientific careers were forged, including Shireen Davies, Susan Pyne and Robin Plevin. Michael also took his first steps in lipid analysis by mass spectrometry (MS) demonstrating that PLD and PLC generate DAG species with distinct fatty acyl chains.

Michael's interest in lipid-MS really took off in 1993, when he returned to Birmingham as Professor of Molecular Pharmacology in the Institute for Cancer Studies. With Trevor Pettitt, Michael developed the methods that made lipid-MS routine, providing unparalleled new insights into lipid signalling; the days of scraping radiolabelled lipids off silica thin layer chromatography (TLC) plates were finally gone! With Matt Hodgkin, Dale Powner, Khalid Saqib, Mark McDermott and Neil Shimwell, Michael also discovered key elements in the regulation and functions of PLD1 and PLD2. Michael became increasingly involved in science leadership, sitting on the MRC Council as Chair of the Molecular and Cellular Medicine Board and serving on Site Visit Assessment panels in the UK and abroad. It was

also during this time that Jane and Michael welcomed their sons Alex and Patrick to their world.

Michael joined the Babraham Institute as Director in 2007, attracted by the opportunity to lead a world-class research institute that pioneered work on lipid signalling. Michael's lab continued to work on PLD, autotaxin/LPA and lipid metabolism. Michael also provided the vision and drive to create a fantastic lipid-MS facility, run by Qifeng Zhang and, latterly, by Andrea Lopez. This increased capability and Michael's encyclopaedic knowledge supported many significant collaborations, including: Eyal Gottlieb and Almut Schulze (cancer), Linda Partridge and David Gems (ageing) and Rob Sempole (overgrowth syndromes). His pre-eminence in lipid signalling and lipidomics was recognized by the award of the Biochemical Society's Morton Lecture in 2018.

The further development of the Babraham Research Campus is the lasting legacy of Michael's leadership at Babraham. Michael worked with Derek Jones and the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC) to bend the ear of successive science ministers, including David Willetts, securing significant public investment so that Babraham is now home to both a world-renowned institute and 60 biotech/drug discovery companies, and is the model for all BBSRC UK Research and Innovation Campuses.

Michael was a tireless supporter of Babraham science, ever present at seminars and student posters, always asking questions and always approachable. He is fondly remembered for turning up slightly late, often out of breath, but immediately 'hooking in' to the scientific discussion. Although the Director, he was still Michael, talking science over a pint at the Social Club or running on the treadmill in the gym. His humanity always shone through, supporting students, post-docs, staff and collaborators through difficult scientific or personal situations.

For all his achievements, Michael's greatest joy and comfort was as a husband and father. He regaled us with his sons' latest exploits, and we all sensed his growing pride as they progressed to university and chose their own paths in life. Their first child, Ellen, tragically died at birth and was always remembered as a member of the family. There was a very strong bond in the Wakelam family and we, his colleagues, offer our deepest condolences and best wishes to Jane, Patrick and Alex.

Simon Cook (Babraham Institute, UK)

Phillip Hawkins (Babraham Institute, UK)

Simon Rudge (Babraham Institute, UK)

Len Stephens (Babraham Institute, UK)