

Sir John Wenman Crofton *Hon FRCP Edin*†

Born: 27/03/1912
Died: 03/11/2009
Specialty: Respiratory/Thoracic Medicine
MB Camb 1937
MD Camb 1947
FRCP Lond 1951
MRCP Edin 1954
FRCP Edin 1956
FFPHM 1973
FRACP 1975
FRCP Irel 1975
FACP 1975
FAMS Hon 1979

(Contributed by Andrew Douglas)

Sir John Crofton, a world famous expert on the treatment of tuberculosis died in Edinburgh at the age of 97. John Crofton was born in Dublin in 1912, the son of a doctor. His earliest recollection was of hearing the bullets hitting the ceiling of his nursery in the Easter Rebellion in 1916. He was educated at Tunbridge School and proceeded to Cambridge University and St Thomas's Hospital in London, qualifying in medicine in 1936. He served in the Royal Army Medical Corps in 1939-45 in France, the Middle East, and Germany. He was mentioned in Despatches in 1941 and finally attained the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. His experience in typhus was the subject of his MD thesis in 1946.

After demobilisation he worked with Guy Scadding at the Brompton Hospital, London, who recruited him into one of the first clinical trials of the antibiotic streptomycin, when he experienced the early benefits of chemotherapy and the disasters which attended the subsequent appearance of drug resistant organisms.

In 1951 he moved to Edinburgh as Professor of Respiratory Diseases and Tuberculosis. In 1951 the first new antibiotics were producing patchy results among more than 50,000 tuberculosis patients in a depressed post-war Britain. While some recovered, many more relapsed and died. Crofton inherited the responsibility for 400 tuberculosis beds in 3 hospitals, with a waiting time for admission of 1 year. He obtained more beds, negotiated for new Consultant appointments and patiently but persistently unified the system, so that within a year of the service operating, the waiting list had disappeared.



Crofton was quick to realise that tuberculosis would only be cured by the use of at least 2 drugs to which the tubercle bacilli had been shown to be sensitive. He led a team of dedicated physicians and bacteriologists to prove that this was so, using streptomycin and para-aminosalicylate (PAS). With the introduction of isoniazid, therapy became standardised using the 3 drugs. Crofton also showed that the 3-drug treatment was as efficacious when given to outpatients as when given to inpatients, thus reducing the demand for beds.

With appropriate antibacterial chemotherapy, the number of resistant organisms declined rapidly. Mortality and notification rates fell more sharply in Edinburgh than in any other centre in the world, and the need for surgical intervention diminished dramatically. The success of the Edinburgh method of treatment was at first greeted with some disbelief, but eventually was adopted in 23 European countries and in America.

Aside from his infectious enthusiasm and his meticulous attention to detail, John Crofton's other great gift was as an organiser, capable of bringing out the best in others. He took trouble to involve all his medical, nursing, paramedical and scientific colleagues, as well as treating the patient as an individual. He travelled to all continents lecturing, advising and sharing his experience with colleagues and politicians alike. It was Crofton too who pioneered the global method now used to fight terrifying new drug-resistant strains that require ever more complex and expensive cocktails of antibiotics, if indeed they are treatable at all.

After the decline of tuberculosis in Britain, John Crofton's research widened, resulting in publications covering a wide

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spectrum of respiratory medicine, including co-authorship in a postgraduate book on Respiratory Diseases, now in its fifth edition. Crofton also founded Scotland's Action on Smoking and Health (ASH), of which his wife, Eileen, was the director. ASH led, after 30 years of groundwork, to Britain's first public smoking ban in Scotland.

When Michael Bloomberg, Mayor of New York City, wanted to spend 200 million dollars of his own money for the good of developing countries, John Crofton was asked for advice. In reply he told Bloomberg to fight smoking, focusing on high-incidence countries and funding a major effort in the media, all of which have come to pass. More recently "Tobacco," co-authored by Crofton, is a campaigners' handbook.

Despite an intensely active participation in medical research he was Dean of the Faculty of Medicine from 1964-66, and a Vice Principal of the University in 1969-70. He was successively President of the Scottish Thoracic Society, the British Thoracic Association, and the Thoracic Society. He was also an adviser to the World Health Organisation on tuberculosis and he served on a number of national scientific and advisory committees in relation to higher medical training and the future of respiratory services. He was President of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh from 1973 to 1976. In recognition of his distinguished contribution to the management of tuberculosis and to medicine he was knighted in 1977, the year of his retirement.

Shortly after retirement he went to Nepal to advise on tuberculosis, which he continued to do until he was 77. Increasingly John and Eileen Crofton were able to pursue major interests in other health problems of the multiply-deprived. In 1992 John Crofton initiated and co-authored a book on clinical tuberculosis, aimed principally at developing countries with tuberculosis problems. This met with outstanding success with 22 languages in many countries.

John Crofton was the recipient of many awards and honours in Britain and worldwide, including the gold medal of the British Thoracic Society and the gold medal of the International Union against Tuberculosis and Lung Diseases. The most recent of these was the Edwin Chadwick medal

in 2008 for outstanding contributions to the advancement of public health.

Among the successes of respiratory medicine during the past 50 years, the control of tuberculosis would clearly head the list. John Crofton's pre-eminent contributions to this success as innovator, researcher and teacher will remain an inspiration for those who will follow in this field.

John's special leisure activity was hill climbing, which he enjoyed well past retirement age. Right to the end the enthusiasm which characterised his life's work never waned. He leaves a wife, Eileen, 5 children one of whom is a consultant physician, 11 grandchildren, and 2 great grandchildren.

Addendum

On 6 November 2009 in conveying our condolences to Lady Crofton and family I wrote to her son Dr Richard Crofton [a 2009 examiner in our M Med/MRCP, Practical assessment of clinical examination skills (PACES)]:

"All our chest physicians went through his teaching while he held the chair in Edinburgh and followed his methods scrupulously on return to Singapore. The principles of treatment continue to this day, no doubt contributing immensely to the control of tuberculosis here."

Excerpt of a citation delivered in July 1979: "Sir John built up one of the best chest services, training and teaching postgraduates from all over the world including our physicians. His textbook on Respiratory Diseases with Dr Andrew Douglas as co-author has indeed become a standard international reference."

He was admitted a Fellow honoris causa as a great teacher to our physicians, as an eminent clinician and scientist, and as a great friend of the Academy of Medicine, Singapore.

Chew Chin Hin
Past Master
Academy of Medicine, Singapore