IN MEMORIAM

Prof. John Guy Widdicombe, 1925–2011: an appreciation of an eminent respiratory physiologist

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John Guy Widdicombe died on August 26, 2011. He will be remembered foremost as an exceptional physiologist who focused primarily on respiratory physiology and pathophysiology, covering diverse areas such as pulmonary and cardiovascular reflexes, bronchomuscular pathophysiology, mucus secretion, airway vasculature and nasal regulation. However, his main area of interest throughout his career was cough; this was his first chosen area of research and, in later years, it became a prime focus of his. He made his first scientific discovery in this field by describing the rapidly adapting receptors in the trachea and bronchi that mediate cough and other reflexes. In his later years, he established the first International Cough Symposium, which came to be held every 2 years in London, UK, and was a course organiser at the sixth symposium in 2010.

John studied medicine at New College, Oxford, UK, and did his clinical training at St Bartholomew's Hospital Medical College, London (now part of Barts and The London School of Medicine and Dentistry) where he qualified in 1949. During his house jobs at St Bartholomew's Hospital, he worked under the leadership of Dr Ronald Christie, a respiratory physician and smoker, who told him that "nobody knows anything about cough". John did not take a clinical path, and in 1950, started his research career as a Medical Research Council Scholar at the Nuffield Institute for Medical Research in Oxford, working under Dr Geoffrey Dawes, who became his other mentor. He began researching the respiratory and cardiovascular physiology of fetal lambs, and the pulmonary and tracheobronchial afferent nerves for cough and respiratory reflexes. From 1955 to 1961, he was Lecturer/Senior Lecturer at St Bartholomew's Hospital Medical School, and following this, he was a Visiting Scientist for 1 year at the Cardiovascular Research Institute of the University of California, San Francisco (CA, USA), working under another mentor, Dr Julius Comroe, on the neural control of bronchomotor tone. He then returned to Oxford as a University Lecturer in Physiology.

In 1972, John was appointed the first Professor and Chairman of the Department of Physiology at St Georges' Hospital Medical School, London, which flourished and attracted many overseas researchers from the USA, Finland, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hong Kong. He retired as Professor Emeritus of the University of London in 1992. However, he continued to remain scientifically active until his death, working

entirely from his home. He continued to publish, particularly in the area of cough and respiratory neurophysiology, and his last publication, in association with Italian collaborators, described the new "deflation reflex". He continued to actively participate in meetings across the world, particularly in relation to cough, and was vigorous in debate about contentious issues, always seeking to find the "true" answer.

John's work and influence was renowned internationally, and he collaborated with groups from around the world, particularly the USA and European cities such as Slovakia and Italy. John won many prizes and honours, held many academic and administrative positions, and was on the editorial boards of many physiological and pharmacological journals, including the *Journal of Physiology*, the *Journal of Applied Physiology* and the *European Respiratory Journal*.

Typical of John, he wrote about his discovery of the rapidly adapting receptor of the afferent pathways for cough in 1954 as being only worth a "silver medal", pointing out that the Germans C.J. Keller and A. Loeser were the first to record afferent activity in the vagus nerves; this statement was a reflection of his modesty in most things. In a recent interview in June 2011, he said:

FIGURE 1. John Guy Widdicombe, 1925–2011.

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"I would have preferred to seem more modest, but then perhaps I am not." Later, when C-fibres were shown to also play a part in cough, he debated and accepted the idea, and reflected that the cough receptor was likely to be much more complicated, as indeed it turns out to be. He was generous to others and an inspiration to many.

John was married twice, lately to Margaret, and was the father of five children, of whom Jonathan is a respiratory biologist in California. His family took centre stage at home, where he often cooked and entertained. He recently said that his fondest memory was his 80th birthday party, which was organised by his wife and family. Those of us who were there remember the evening of Irish songs and limericks amongst family and friends.

Another typical example of John's generous hospitality was his traditional invitation to all of the Cough Symposium's faculty to a summer's afternoon extended lunch party at his home in Wimbledon, UK, where an international gathering of scientists, clinicians and family friends would discuss tennis, politics and cough while sharing curry and wine. This was also an example of John Widdicombe's belief that "friendship, collaboration, endeavour and pushing back the frontiers of knowledge" were the most important things in his life, all in one.

In his retirement, John also loved spending time in his holiday home in France, originally an old derelict farm which he renovated himself. It was there that John became ill and was admitted to the local hospital in Cahors where he died.