



Obituary

“Be brilliant!”—a tribute to Tom Connors

**Professor Tom Connors (1934–2002)**

Professor Thomas A. Connors, known affectionately and respectfully as Tom by all his many friends and colleagues, died on the 4th February 2002 from the disease he had dedicated his life to understanding and treating.

Tom started his scientific career in 1953, following secondary education at Wimbledon College. After completing a degree in Physiology at University College London in 1957, he went on to be a PhD student with the late Walter Ross at the Chester Beatty Research Institute in London, part of the Institute of Cancer Research (ICR). Tom obtained a PhD in Organic Chemistry in 1960, after which he joined the scientific staff of the ICR becoming Reader in Biochemical Pharmacology in 1965 and Head of the Department of Experimental Chemotherapy in 1970. He moved to take up the Directorship of the Medical Research Council Toxicology Unit, Carshalton, London, in 1976, where he stayed until his official retirement in 1991. Even after this, Tom remained closely associated with the Unit until it moved to Leicester in 1993, whereupon Tom pursued his interests in drug delivery at the School of Pharmacy, London. From this brief biography, the breadth and depth of Tom's scientific training and expertise can be readily appreciated. He recognised, through personal experience, the importance of multi-disciplinary research in solving the cancer problem, a path many others have subsequently followed.

Tom's achievements in research span four decades, during which time he was involved in many of the important developments in cancer treatment of the day. For example, Tom was amongst the first to realise the potential impact of host and tumour drug metabolism on drug action. He contributed greatly to the studies of oxazaphosphorine metabolism that identified the importance of cytochrome P450-mediated activation pathways to the antitumour activity and urothelial toxicity of this class of drugs—to this day a textbook example. The group led by Tom performed key pre-clinical experiments with cisplatin and, on the basis of his data, Eve Wiltshaw embarked on clinical trials with cisplatin for the first time. This contribution alone would have secured his place in history; however, not content with the success of cisplatin, Tom initiated the search for less toxic analogues. This work was continued after his move to the MRC Unit by Ken Harrap and Hilary Calvert, and resulted in the identification of carboplatin. Recognising the inherently limited selectivity of cytotoxic drugs, Tom personally explored, and was a strong supporter of, attempts to specifically deliver cytotoxic drugs to, or activate them in, tumours. He made significant contributions to the areas of antibody and gene-directed enzyme prodrug therapy, as well as polymer therapeutics, and a large number of clinical trials have stemmed from this work.

In addition to his outstanding scientific achievements, Tom was a consummate organiser who could cut through red tape and go right to the heart of a problem. With the late Brian Fox, Tom recognised in the 1970s that the missing logistical link in cancer chemotherapy was the bridge between *in vivo* preclinical studies and clinical trials, i.e. the facilities for bulk synthesis, toxicology, formulation and early clinical trials management. With funding from the then Cancer Research Campaign, Tom and Brian established the CRC Phase I/II Clinical Trials Committee in 1980 which has gone on to achieve global recognition for the unparalleled number of new treatments it has taken into cancer trials; over 90 at the last count. Certain of the agents studied have become marketed drugs, notably temozolomide discovered by Malcolm Stevens, and many other compounds are showing promise. The viability of an academic drug development initiative like the CRC Phase I/II Committee is dependent upon safe yet cost-effective procedures. Tom was a vociferous advocate and pioneer of minimal preclinical toxicology for early clinical trials with new anticancer drugs, and rodent-only toxicology was eventually included in the European Medicines Evaluation Agency guidelines, an achievement of which he was justly proud.

Although Tom never worked outside the UK, he was in every sense a truly international scientist. He was an active member of the European Organization for Research and Treatment of Cancer (EORTC) for many years, being elected to the position of Chairman of the Laboratory Research Division in 1993, and a member of the EORTC Board from 1991 to 1996. In North America, Tom served on a number of committees of the US National Cancer Institute, as well as the General Motors Cancer Research Foundation Awards Assembly, all in addition to over 30 UK committees that he either chaired or served on. Tom received far too many personal awards, medals and accolades, many of them international, to even start to list. These awards are to be found in the study of his house where, suffice to say, they fill the room.

As a person and a character, Tom was the individual for whom the phrase 'larger than life' was invented. He was caring, approachable, knowledgeable and, above all else and at all times, fantastically good fun to be with. Tom knew everyone, and everyone knew Tom. He had an elephantine memory and could connect people, science and possibilities in a way that will be impossible to replace. He had what he called his operators or 'oppos' in every institution, organisation and company, and he used these contacts to excellent effect. Tom took no account whatsoever of a person's 'status', and was always especially interested in the work of younger scientists, making a special effort to go to their posters at meetings, talk to them in the bar and offer them advice and support. Through his network of friends and contacts, as well as through direct research training, Tom has guided the careers of many of today's senior cancer researchers and this is yet another way his influence will be felt for many years to come.

As a character who was larger than life, Tom's contribution will outlive him in many ways. As with any untimely death, we will all be left with questions we wish we had asked, and sentiments we wish we had expressed. However, to counteract the sadness of his loss, there are all the happy memories that Tom has given us to put a smile on our faces. These memories will also, hopefully, be some support for Tom's wife, Pearl, his daughters, Clare and Frances, and their families at this difficult time.

As he would have wished, we should all raise our glasses to celebrate the life and achievements of the truly 'brilliant' Professor Tom Connors—friend, colleague, gentleman and scientist extraordinaire.

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