



David Tyrrell (1925—2005)

Virologist who did so much to advance our knowledge of the common cold

Great men let their work speak for them, and no one better embodied this ideal than David Tyrrell. Many in Whiteparish knew of him only as the dedicated organist and choirmaster at our church of All Saints, tirelessly rehearsing and accompanying the choir over many years. Others knew of his interest in natural history and the pleasure he derived from maintaining his beautifully landscaped garden. Modest to a fault, he spoke very little about his work, so that only a few were aware that he was one of the world's leading authorities on the common cold and other virus-induced ailments.

Only now, after lengthy obituaries in *The Times*, *Guardian* and *Independent**, as well as local papers, a BBC broadcast, and the publishing of his book *Cold Wars - The Fight Against the Common Cold*, can we begin to recognise the immense scale of his scientific achievements.

David Arthur John Tyrrell was born in Ashford, Surrey in 1925. His father was an accountant and his mother taught French and Mathematics. Academically bright, he was top of his class at Ashford County School and continued to do well at King Edward VII School, Sheffield when the family moved there in 1940. And it was in Sheffield that he entered medical school, graduating with distinction in 1948.

A career as a physician beckoned but, instead, he followed his professor's suggestion that he take up the study of viruses, a very obscure field of research at the time. In 1950 he married Moyra, also a doctor, and the following year they travelled to America where David continued to study viruses at the Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research in New York. Their advanced facilities and disciplined approach to research impressed him, and he carried this experience with him when, in 1954, he was invited back to Sheffield to head a new virus research laboratory.

His work there was going well when, three years later, to his considerable surprise, he was asked by the Medical Research Council to run the research programme at the Common Cold Research Unit (CCU) in Salisbury. David and Moyra, with their young family, arrived at the CCU in April 1957. The unit was already ten years old then and had not made a lot of progress. But slowly, over the following years, Dr Tyrrell and his team began to unravel the mysteries of the common cold. They showed how viruses attack the body's cells and subvert them for their own use; how the body's immune system springs into action, and still remains the most effective means of getting rid of the disease; and how colds are transmitted almost entirely by airborne particles. They also debunked many of the fanciful notions that people had about how one catches colds and to what extent they can be treated.

Most significantly, they identified over 200 cold viruses, which meant that it was impossible to produce a single cold vaccine. The CCU, known locally as the Harvard Hospital, owed its accommodation to the generosity of Harvard University and the American Red Cross, who shipped over an entire, prefabricated hospital complete with equipment and staff as their contribution to Britain's war effort. This was then taken over by the CCU after the war and converted into laboratories, offices and living quarters for staff and volunteers.

The volunteers, as most of us know, were those intrepid people who came for a period of ten days while the scientists gave them doses of a specific virus in the hope that they would catch a cold. Then they studied its progress through the stages of infection. Most of the volunteers loved the experience — it was, after all, a free holiday in beautiful surroundings — and many returned year after year. Some 20,000 came over the lifetime of the unit. During his time at the CCU, Dr Tyrrell was also appointed Head of the Division of Communicable Diseases, Deputy Director of the Clinical Research Centre Harrow Middlesex and Director of the WHO Reference Centre for Respiratory Virus Infections at the CCU. In 1970 he was elected FRS and in 1980 was awarded the CBE.

David and Moyra moved to Ash Lodge in Whiteparish in 1981. Photos of the time show it as a plain brick house sitting in grounds that were not much more than a field. They added much to it over the years, and particularly enjoyed creating the garden. Gardening was a passion that they both shared, the home was always filled with fresh flowers and meals usually included home grown vegetables and fruit. The daughters, Fran and Sue now had children of their own but Whiteparish became the centre for family gatherings each Christmas. They thoroughly enjoyed village life, and made involvement in the church a top priority. After the years in North London they loved the peace and quiet, and David could identify the song of every bird in the garden.

Moyra worked as a paediatrician and often went to places like Bulford camp to run clinics for infants, vaccinating and doing health checks. She was also involved with flower arranging in the church for many years and with the Mothers Union. In recent years David chaired a number of government committees concerned with CJD/BSE, AIDS and influenza. And until shortly before his death he was actively involved in supporting new research into the causes of chronic fatigue syndrome. He was also president of the Christian Medical Fellowship and a strongly supportive president of the Friends of the Christian Medical College at Ludhiana in the Punjab.

David Tyrrell died on May 2, 2005, aged 79.

Michael Fielder

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** Although Dr Tyrrell and electron microscopist Dr Joan Almeida had been first to identify and photograph a virus of the coronavirus type, several decades before his death, none of his obituaries (in the newspapers mentioned in **this** obituary, at least) seem to have mentioned this. DH*