

Gordon Waddell CBE, D.Sc. MD FRCS: 1942 - 2017

Born 21 September 1942. Died 20 April 2017

Gordon Waddell, the orthopaedic surgeon and back pain pioneer who played a seminal role in the biopsychosocial approach to understanding and managing back pain has died, age 74. Gordon was a first-rate scientist and communicator, with an uncanny ability to synthesise complex information and present it in a way that changed how people did things. His impact has been worldwide.



It was in his clinics that Gordon realised the contemporary medical model did not adequately explain the impact that low back pain had on his patients. His tremendous capacity for careful data collection and analysis enabled him to disentangle the physical, psychological and behavioural aspects of low back pain and its effects. In so doing he constructed a number of new clinical measurement tools, and developed the biopsychosocial model of low back disability, for which he received the 1987 Volvo Award.

It was interesting that Gordon, as a surgeon, should be invited to join the groups that developed the early primary care back pain guidelines on back pain in the UK, the USA, and Scandinavia. He was instrumental in presenting the evidence challenging the use of passive treatment such as bed rest, and he went on to co-author *The Back Book*, the respected booklet, now translated into many languages, to help people with back pain avoid its disabling consequences.

In addition to a host of publications, Gordon somehow found time to write his seminal book on back pain - *The Back Pain Revolution*. It is a sublime example of how he could communicate complex and sometimes contentious ideas. Perhaps more than any other single publication this book has changed the way back pain is treated and managed, although Gordon would be the first to concede that the revolution is not yet over: and we still tend to over-medicalize symptoms!

Gordon next tackled the social dimension of back pain and, escaping from his primary discipline, refocused his energy on the work-health interface. He made a major contribution to the development of occupational health guidelines for managing back pain at work, published in 2000 by the UK Faculty of Occupational Medicine, from whom he later received an Honorary Fellowship (2007). The focus of his work remained on implementing early intervention to avoid disability, and there followed a series of major policy reviews commissioned primarily by the UK Government. Predominant among these was the influential report presenting the evidence that (good) work is good for our health and wellbeing (2006). It is widely accepted that this piece of work underpins contemporary rehabilitation initiatives (in clinical, occupational, and policy realms) aimed at helping workers avoid unnecessary sickness absence and disability.

The influence that Gordon had on the worlds of pain, work, rehabilitation, and policy was recognised with a raft of honours in numerous countries. He was regularly consulted for advice on disability management by government departments and clinical organisations across the globe, and his characteristically spicy conference presentations will be long remembered with fondness.

In 2009 Gordon chose to retire from academic life to spend more time with his family. In typical style, he quietly waved goodbye as he left a conference podium to catch his plane back to Glasgow.

In sum, Gordon's career has been characterised by a strong work ethic, scrupulous intellectual honesty, and a courteous manner, yet (perhaps surprisingly) he was somewhat shy. He can be described, in equal measures, as a tenacious and courageous researcher, as a visionary, and as a mentor who thoroughly enjoyed the professional altercations which he inevitably encountered in challenging accepted wisdom and pushing back the boundaries of science and understanding. Despite all his professional achievements, Gordon found time for restoring a 17th Century cottage in the Scottish Highlands, and to write a 500-year history of the glen (*Highland Roots: the real story of a highland cottage, 2013*). He loved hill walking, and said that he did much thinking out on the mountains. Interestingly, although he was entitled to a certificate for conquering all 283 Munros (Scottish mountains over 3000 feet), he insisted it be made out in the name of the border collie who accompanied him on all his climbs!

Despite his immense professional achievements, Gordon was a family man, and it is fitting that in his later years he had the opportunity to enjoy precious time with his wife Sandra, their three daughters (Carol, Joyce and Hazel), their husbands and the grandchildren.

Chris Main; Kim Burton