Professor Oliver Wrong

Pioneering physician and researcher who played a key role in establishing the discipline of nephrology

Oliver Wrong was Emeritus Professor of Medicine at University College London Medical School and one of Britain's most distinguished physicians, serving the NHS throughout his career. He was a pioneering medical researcher, pre-eminent in his field and active right up to his death, but he never lost sight of his patients. He had what Denis Healey once called an intellectual hinterland, as unusual among doctors as it is among politicians. This embraced flora and fauna, history and art, an adoration of J. S. Bach, and an insatiable curiosity about the world around him.

Wrong was a member of a talented, sometimes eccentric - but always engaging - family which embraced, through marriage, the writer Naomi Mitchison; the Labour Minister Peter Shore; the Canadian intellectual Michael Ignatieff; and the Nobel Laureates Dorothy Hodgkin and Alan Hodgkin. It was a family in which he easily held his own.

Wrong began his work in the 1950s and played a key role in establishing the discipline of nephrology, the study and treatment of kidney diseases, on a science-based footing, resulting in specialist care for patients with renal failure. His work looked far beyond the field in his quest to prevent kidney and metabolic bone disorders and improve patient survival. A seminal paper, The Excretion of Acid in Renal Disease, published in 1959, was cited by other researchers more than 400 times in its first two decades. There were to be more than 100 other original articles of global relevance, defining new diseases and establishing their underlying mechanisms, notably in southeast Asia and South America.

Under his leadership, a generation of doctors devoted themselves to resolving problems in the field of electrolyte balance, as well as studying the control of body salt and water metabolism. He returned to the UK in 1954, as university tutor in medicine at Manchester Royal Infirmary.

Tall and curly-haired, Wrong was an elegant figure, smoking a pipe and driving a MG convertible. He also owned a grand piano, on which he played Schubert, Mozart and his beloved Bach. In 1956 he married an Italian primary school teacher, Marilda Musacchio, whom he had met on a driving holiday in the Black Forest two years earlier. She had been hitchhiking and he had given her a lift. They subsequently had three daughters.

Wrong moved to UCH in London, where he worked with Professor Charles Dent and Professor Max (later Lord) Rosenheim, and was then appointed senior lecturer at Hamme-smith Hospital. The family moved to Scotland in 1969 after Wrong took up the chair at Dundee University, but returned to London three years later when he was appointed UCH's Professor of Medicine.

In the following decades he wrote widely on kidney diseases, metabolic bone disorders, gastrointestinal handling of electrolytes, acid-base balance and the excretion of nitrogenous substances, also publishing the reference book The Large Intestine. He provided an outstanding example of what can be achieved by detailed, sustained clinical observation, and he demonstrated how essential such methodology still is to current medical research and practice.

Blessed with a mordant wit and caustic intelligence, Wrong was exasperated by the medical world's relative lack of curiosity in his area of expertise, an attitude which he believed was found of rural villages in Highgate and moved into a flat near UCH and various medical libraries so that he could continue his research.

Wrong was to publish more than 40 papers in "retirement", including one in the journal Nature on Dent's disease, a disease that Wrong had named after his late mentor. Many of Wrong's colleagues think that the condition should have been called Dent-Wrong disease.

It was an act of typical generosity, given Wrong's central role in defining the kidney disorders' features, often in defiance of general scepticism.

Wrong also undertook important work unravelling the molecular basis of familial renal tubular acidosis (RTA) when he was well past retirement age. He was a regular contributor to the teaching medical rounds at UCH and the Royal Postgraduate Medical School, now part of Imperial. "Oliver was always the one who sat quietly at the back and then put the one intelligent question," one colleague commented.

Wrong dictated final amendments to his last paper, a review of the tropical form of distal RTA, from his bed in intensive care.

He is survived by his wife, Marilda, and by two daughters.

Oliver Wrong, Professor of Medicine, University College London, 1922-90, was born on February 7, 1922. He died of pulmonary fibrosis on February 24, 2012, aged 87.