WK (“Bill”) Stewart hailed from Dundee, his father being the head of the East of Scotland School of Navigation, then based at the Technical College in Dundee. Educated at the city’s Morgan Academy, where he was school dux, he had a brilliant undergraduate career, graduating MB ChB with honours at St Andrews University/Dundee Royal Infirmary. After house jobs in the city and a period of national service in the Navy, he returned to St Andrews as a Pathologist before transferring to the Department of Medicine in Dundee where he pursued an interest in metabolic medicine. During this period, he developed an interest in the measurement, turnover and function of the magnesium ion in health and disease, including renal failure and during periods of prolonged fasting for obesity. The publications from this period ultimately, led to his MD Thesis.

Working with one of his mentors, Professor K G Lowe, who was developing treatments for acute renal failure in the 1950s, he became interested in the process and mechanism of haemodialysis and was tasked with setting up a chronic dialysis programme in the 1960s in Maryfield Hospital, Dundee. He was appointed Lecturer, Senior Lecturer and ultimately Reader in medicine. During this period, his research focussed on measurement of retinol and investigation of the practice of Vitamin A supplementation which he conclusively showed could be damaging. This work ultimately resulted in the award of a PhD in 1980. He also developed a career-long fascination with anaemia management in uraemia and was a proponent of regular intravenous iron dextran administration in the pre-erythropoietin era.

In common with many of his contemporaries in Nephrology, he became involved in the evolution of the technology and practice of haemodialysis and peritoneal dialysis. He was particularly far-sighted in pioneering a version of what later became sodium profiling and negative pressure ultrafiltration with a coil dialyser before the use of these techniques became widespread. He fought for and oversaw the progressive expansion of the Dialysis and Renal Units initially moving from Maryfield to Dundee Royal Infirmary and latterly to Ninewells Hospital where it remains today. In his later years with his background in anaemia management, he supervised a clinical and research programme monitoring the clinical use and side effects of recombinant erythropoietin, with Dr J E Taylor and Professor J Belch. Clinically, he functioned single-handedly for over 20 years despite a long-standing and vigorous campaign to increase the Consultant and Registrar establishments, but was ably assisted by a team of research and technical staff, particularly Mrs Laura Fleming, a
biochemist who co-authored a number of his scientific papers. By the time of his retirement, he had around 150 publications listed.

First and foremost, however, he was a clinician and teacher. His lectures, clinics and ward rounds were very popular and memorable for his incisive intellect, clinical acumen and acerbic wit and generations of medical students, postgraduates and colleagues benefitted from exposure to “Kidney Bill” as he was affectionately known. His patients regarded him with awe and loyalty because of his clear vision and tenacious support. Even if they did not always understand his explanations in detail, they always got his “drift”.

In the latter five years of his clinical practice when the Renal Unit’s growing staff allowed him more time, he developed interests in medical history (especially local) and art and was an enthusiastic co-founder of the University of Dundee Medical Museum with Laura Fleming and Professor Charles Forbes. Although a private man and a confirmed bachelor, he had a wide circle of friends and was a very convivial lunch and dinner companion and raconteur. Despite a very heavy workload, he enthusiastically and successfully dabbled in the stock market and was visible in local theatre and restaurants.

He survived in good health for over 20 years after retirement and resolutely eschewed all attempts to persuade him to maintain an interest in teaching and research a decision regarded by many as a loss to the medical community.

Author: Iain Henderson