

Newsletter

"To advance education and research in the science of psychopharmacology for the public benefit"

June 2007



June 2007 Special Issue



Robert William Kerwin

1955 – 2007

We have all been saddened by the untimely death of Professor Robert Kerwin on the 8th of February 2007. Rob was a man of extraordinary achievement in the field of psychopharmacology, and a long-time active and supportive BAP member. He was a Council member for four years and Treasurer for five years, where he helped to consolidate the stable financial position the BAP now enjoys. Few if any members of the BAP will not have known of Rob in some capacity and been influenced by him. For some it will be from reading his scientific papers, hearing him lecture in his own inimitable style, or receiving his supervision or mentorship, while for many he was a research or clinical colleague and personal friend.

The BAP Lifetime Achievement Award 2007 will be awarded in memory of Professor Kerwin. In addition, there will be a symposium in his honour at the 2008 summer meeting, and there are plans to set up an annual Robert Kerwin award, which will support BAP members early in their careers. This special edition of the Newsletter is dedicated to him, with personal contributions from BAP members. In such ways the BAP intends to commemorate the remarkable contribution to psychopharmacology of this remarkable man and seek to keep his inspirational spirit alive.

Thomas Barnes BAP President

I welcome the initiative of BAP in awarding the lifetime achievement award for 2007 to Robert Kerwin. In his sadly curtailed years, Rob accomplished more than the rest of us can hope to do in several lifetimes. He always worked intensively and his productivity was quite astonishing. He already had an impressive publication list when he first came to the Institute of Psychiatry over 20 years ago.

Others are more qualified to evaluate his research career than I am. However, his interests ranged from molecular studies of neurotransmitter receptor variation and treatment response, through functional neuroimaging of drug receptor interaction, to post-mortem and molecular pharmacological studies of biochemical abnormalities in the psychoses. He combined great expertise in fundamental laboratory research with extremely capable and experienced clinical management of challenging patients. He was a pioneer in the optimal use of clozapine in otherwise largely untreatable schizophrenics, and in refining its efficacy by adopting pharmacogenetic techniques.

However, I wish to draw attention to one contribution of continuing importance. When he first came to the Maudsley, he assumed the chairmanship of its Formulary Committee. It soon became an important and vibrant part of both the teaching and practical aspects of the Maudsley and its patient care. He and the Chief Pharmacist, David Taylor, drew up prescribing guidelines. Initially just a few sheets, these burgeoned into probably the most widely-used formulary in the world. It is just going into its 9th edition. I know Robert was very proud of this achievement, which may well turn out to be his most enduring legacy to the practice of psychopharmacology.

Rob was plagued by ill-health in the last few years of his career. He knew that he had a chronic relapsing illness but the severity of the episodes dismayed him. His treatment in itself was very unpleasant, and his activities became increasingly restricted. About a month before he died, he told me that he was being forced to contemplate a reluctant early retirement, but he was going to battle on as long as possible. He said he did not think he would attain the age of 60. Unfortunately, even this aspiration was not fulfilled.

Rob was an engaging, highly intelligent, unaffected young man who died tragically in the prime of his life. He remains a perpetually youthful figure in our memories and I am sure those will not be dimmed by the passage of time. I mourn his passing, and my heart goes out to his wife and young family in their grievous loss. I hope they will be comforted by the knowledge that we all regarded him as one of the most talented and productive clinical and basic research workers that the Maudsley and Institute of Psychiatry, indeed the psychiatric profession, has ever seen.

Malcolm Lader

I first met Rob in 1993 and worked closely with him until his death. Rob was an outstanding academic, a brilliant clinician and a rare intellect. His influence on everyday practice in the UK and wider a field was substantial.

These things are well known but in remembering Rob now, I think of his humour and generosity. For a quiet man Rob was always good company. He was sharply observant and took a keen interest in everyone he met. In his laconic style he was also very amusing, with a well developed sense of the absurd encapsulated in a handful of catchphrases (“it’s déjà vu all over again”) which he brought out just when you least expected him to. This capacity to make people laugh was greatly exaggerated when Rob presented to an audience. Here Rob was most at ease, combining irreverent wit and a sardonic style without ever causing offence or diminishing the scientific value of his presentation. His inaugural lecture as a professor was the funniest lecture I have ever attended.

Rob’s generosity took many forms. He was a frequent party host to friends and colleagues and was happy to include work colleagues in his family life. Rob was also someone to whom you could go for help, as many people did. Others, myself included, were helped without their knowing or at least without being told. Rob was a great supporter of people; a champion of others and their causes and viewpoints. He did this without ever expecting any credit, reward or gratitude.

Rob was greatly admired around the world for his work in a number of fields. Those closer to him admired him in the same way but felt also a great fondness for him and a dedication to him as a leader, a friend or colleague.

A great man greatly missed.

David Taylor

My major experience of Rob, apart from chatting at BAP meetings, was our first encounter at a conference on Preclinical Psychopharmacology in Meribel. An excuse for a skiing holiday if I ever heard one, apart from the 3 hours at the beginning and end of each day when we actually had to work!! Rob had a pilots licence and he asked if any damn fools would like a trip if he could hire a single engine prop at the airstrip half way up one

of the mountains. Fortunately they wouldn't let him up without a co-pilot but there was still room for one person to brave the back seat. Once bladder and bowels were settled it was a terrific experience. We took off and landed several times for him to practice, exhilarating being 3 feet off the ground one second and out over the valley several thousand feet below the next. We then flew for about 30 minutes above the mountain peaks and ski

slopes in the area. A wonderful clear sky and the feeling that one could just reach out and pick up the apparent small people skiing below. A successful final landing and the heart eventually removed itself from the mouth, but an amazing adrenaline experience which I shall always remember and will be eternally grateful to Rob.

Peter Pearce

Rob Kerwin was my dear friend and colleague from 1986 to his untimely death just this last month. We both joined the Maudsley clinical training scheme with a dozen others in 1986. Rob had already shown his passion and talent for neuropharmacology having worked in industry for a period before joining the Maudsley. Early on, he was writing on the clinical issues that confronted him, and would see his patients for years after their initial presentation with the kindness dedication and commitment found in truly gifted psychiatrists. Their predicament and easing their suffering, was a touchstone in his life. He had a brilliant mind, which got to the core of any matter put before him. I was unbelievably lucky to have been mentored by him in a relationship which spanned twenty years. His was a supportive generous creativity. I well recall hesitantly sharing an idea with him expecting a sceptical response. His eyes would close and he would tip his head back, ponder the question for a minute or so and then outline the originality of the idea and how to progress it as well as the best way to proceed. He did not indulge in extended pointless discussion which led to his hated "armchair research". He had the gift of making an idea real and the courage of an excellent clinical research scientist to carry projects further than had been done before. It is certainly true to say that he was seminal to starting the field of molecular psychiatry in the UK and was honoured for his contributions by the Joel Elkes award from the American College of Neuropharmacology in the 1990's. He sponsored many PhD students to success and his contribution went further in this area by his committed roles in the British Association of Psychopharmacology, The British Pharmacological Society and the Royal College of

Psychiatrists. His kindness was exemplified in his willingness to foster young students from all over the world and sustain friendships with his mentees long after the first body of work was finished. He became a fierce proponent of the most modern drug treatments for schizophrenia, and it is fair to say was the main architect behind the revolution in drug prescribing for schizophrenia in the UK and internationally starting the clozapine clinic approach which was both patient centred and holistic, and was recognised as an exemplary clinical service winning the UK Hospital Doctor Award for clinical service delivery. He was extraordinary in other ways too, Perhaps few knew of his love of flying and his pilot's license. He used to fly whenever there was a free moment. He was also a keen guitarist and loved music, especially enjoying country and western music of which he was something of an aficionado.

He was working on the use of pharmacogenetic methods to predict potential response to clozapine and with his usual energy had formed a company to disseminate the approach to as many patients as possible. In this he was ably assisted by a team of dedicated researchers and colleagues including Dr. Janet Munro and Dr. Maria Arranz. The now familiar buzz words of 'translational' and 'leading edge' researcher applied to him absolutely and his legacy will continue in the students fortunate enough to receive his guidance and wisdom and in the novel approaches he championed which will turn out to be visionary, genuine advances for the clinical neuroscience of severe mental illness.

Lyn Pilowsky

On advice that “you should apply to the Maudsley”, I duly dispatched my CV.

A few days later Rob called me in the midst of a busy day as a Surgical House Officer to suggest I came and met him. With some apprehension I went up the Institute of Psychiatry where we talked as much about research as rowing. Unlike many SHOs at the Maudsley, my publication record was not stellar. Rob encouraged and supported me with time in his lab to get some work completed and written up. He encouraged me to apply for a Wellcome Fellowship (and re-apply!), present the first data from this at the BAP annual meeting and to become an active BAP member. I know without this mentorship early on at the Institute of Psychiatry I would never have achieved what I have done. His death has made me reflect on what a contribution he made to my academic career and how can I give similar mentorship to other students and doctors.

On a more personal note, one of the last times I travelled with Rob to a conference was soon after we had the news we could adopt a girl. He told me how fantastic it was to have girls, his pride in his family was clear.

It has still not sunk in that I will not see or hear from him again, but I hope that supporting and encouraging others will pay tribute to his mentorship of me.

Anne Lingford-Hughes

I first met Rob in 1990. I was an MRC Training Fellow in the early stage of my career, studying gene expression in Alzheimer’s disease but really wanting to apply the methods I had learned to schizophrenia. Rob was already an established researcher whose work on glutamate receptors in schizophrenia I had read with great interest. He immediately grasped the potential of molecular techniques, and so together we carried out the first gene expression study in schizophrenia. With Rob as senior author, the study was published in *The Lancet* — already a regular occurrence for him, but a big deal to me — not least because it helped me get a job in Oxford, and led to my first two research grants. Our collaborations continued, with a series of papers over the next ten years, and developed into a friendship and many overlapping interests - not least, having three daughters of the same age, as well as the fact that I took over from him as BAP Treasurer. Throughout, I remained deeply impressed by Rob’s intellect, and his ability to identify novel, important research areas and then to carry out key studies, which he did across the whole range of psychopharmacology. His devastating illness and untimely death have deprived the BAP, and British psychiatry, of a leading figure.

Paul Harrison

“Cheese is just cheese – it melts on toasts!” This was Rob’s point of view: clear and straight to the point, as usual. We were having dinner at his house, to celebrate a grant: Rob, Fiona, Emma, Lottie (the youngest one had not arrived yet) together with myself and my wife. And, as usual when Italians are at the table, we started talking about food, and, in particular, about cheese in Italian cuisine. And then Rob explained “his” point of view about cheese. We all laughed, and I never thought about this moment again. That is, of course, until he died.

When people leave us, we search for, and cherish, every personal moment we have had together. So I remembered our dinner. The house where they had just moved in. The happy meal with the family. His joy for the successful grant application. And his comments on “cheese”: straight and to the point. And then I remembered that this was no exception: he had always tried to teach me to be straight and to the point. Like when I was his SHO on the Psychiatric Intensive Care Unit and he guided me through difficult clinical decisions. Or when he supervised my experimental work for the PhD. Or when he corrected my draft grant applications. Or when he listened to my talk rehearsals. And now I know that his teaching will remain with me forever.

Carmine M. Pariante

Many BAP Members will already have appreciated the enormous contributions Rob made to the BAP and the Journal of Psychopharmacology over many years as Treasurer of the Society and as a member of the Journal's editorial advisory board. Before these roles Rob had been a pioneering neuroscientist who as a Cambridge medical student took time out from his medical training to study for a PhD in Chris Pycock's lab in the Pharmacology Dept of Bristol University. Here he quickly showed his outstanding academic potential by discovering the critical reciprocal interaction between dopamine systems in PFC and basal ganglia which has since led to major advances in the understanding and treatment of schizophrenia and ADHD. On resumption of clinical training Rob continued to be active in research, staying at the cutting edge of psychopharmacology. His potential was obvious and it was no surprise that the Institute of Psychiatry snapped him up to revitalise their biological psychiatry and psychopharmacology programmes. In this role Rob proved an outstanding appointment making important advances in schizophrenia, through imaging and molecular genetic studies on drug treatments, as well as pioneering numerous clinical trials of new agents. His observations that 5HT_{2C} receptor polymorphisms had predictive value in the therapeutic response to clozapine were a landmark finding that helped usher in the new era of genetic psychopharmacology.

Those Members who knew Rob well will also have been aware of the fact that he did all this in the face of a chronic debilitating illness – systemic sarcoid - that caused him at times intense physical distress and required treatment with medications that themselves produced considerable secondary problems. The reason only his close friends and colleagues knew of his suffering was that Rob showed enormous resilience and courage throughout. He never complained and unless you directly questioned him you would never know the distress, both somatic and psychological he was experiencing.

I never ceased to wonder how he held it all together let alone continued to produce at such a high level as well as support his large team of clinical researchers and research students. He inspired and encouraged many individuals, many of whom are now leading groups of their own at prestigious universities. Some, such as Anne Lingford-Hughes and Lyn Pilowsky, followed his footsteps onto BAP Council.

In the last issue of Journal of Psychopharmacology we published an editorial that sadly may turn out to be his last publication. In a way the topic of this piece was particularly apposite as it addressed the critical issue of the value the pharmaceutical industry as perceived and regulated by government. Probably because of his working class background Rob was an indefatigable supporter of the rights of the disadvantaged - so he was a great champion of optimising access of psychiatric patients to the best drugs. He saw the increasing antipathy to drug treatments of schizophrenia and in particular opposition to new medications in some sections of the media, government bodies and even the medical profession, as being unjust and demeaning of their illnesses so promoted their cause relentlessly. They as well as his friends, colleagues and family have lost a loyal true and highly effective medical scientist.

David Nutt

Editor, J.Psychopharm

I first met Rob when I was psychiatry senior registrar at Queen Square and he was a registrar in neurology, back in 1985. He was dazzlingly bright, energetic, slightly gauche back then. Our paths crossed many times. My favourite memory of him (in fact, one of my favourite memories, period) was in 1998 when he flew David Collier and myself from a strip of mud called Southampton airport across the channel to northern France, to watch the total solar eclipse from the totality zone. A beery evening was followed by a sunny morning. We watched the eclipse from the airstrip. Thanks, Rob.

Shôn Lewis

I was Rob Kerwin's first PhD student in his innovative program of pharmacogenetic research, which like its founder, was ahead of its time. This clinically important field has grown exponentially and as one of its pioneers in schizophrenia research, Rob remained at the forefront, ever supportive of collaborators and students alike in his dedicated quest for improvements in the medical treatment of schizophrenia patients.

Despite his many accomplishments and his stature in the field, Rob remained humble, approachable, committed to the wellbeing of his team and was also highly ethical in his transactions. When reminiscing about his school days, he said that he was 'incredibly lucky' to have performed so well at 'S' level because the articles he had read in scientific journals had been relevant to his exam questions. I would differ with this conclusion because only exceptional students regularly read scientific journals before university. This was not false modesty, he was continually striving for achievement and when successful, there was always another mountain to climb or plane to fly.

He made his research team a part of his extended family and we celebrated many successes together, including his promotion to Professor, his 40th birthday, his DSc award, the numerous grants awarded to the research group and sometimes just because it was Friday and the pub was close by. In addition he was ready to recognize and nurture talent in others and administer pastoral support when needed. During those financially-challenged student days, he helped organize temporary Pharmaceutical positions for me. Another example of his altruism includes his sacrifice of Industry-sponsored expenses for attendance of an international conference so that another student and I had funds to attend. He enthusiastically helped to further the careers of his mentees and his mentorship and support continued long after I left his group.

My last meeting with Rob was at a conference in Boston. His spirits were high and it is tragic that he has left us so early. More than a decade after leaving his group I realize that his qualities are rare and that there are few mentors within medical research of his calibre.

Monsheel Sodhi

Rob Kerwin was a most gifted individual, whose passing represents a great loss to Psychopharmacology both nationally and internationally. His commitment to that field was such that we probably do not yet realise the full extent of the legacy that he left. Although his health had not been good in recent years, his sudden death at a relatively young age nonetheless came as a shock and surprise to many. I would like to extend condolences particularly to his wife, Fiona, and children, and to his Personal Assistant, Pat O'Hara.

Rob mentored and gave opportunities to many young scientists and health care professionals in the UK that they would not otherwise have had. I am particularly grateful to him for the opportunities, support, and supervision that he gave to me in the early stages of my career in academic psychiatry. I was one of the many that he somehow found funding for; his provision for me for six months as a Research Registrar was crucial. He was my PhD supervisor, and it is thanks to him that I had a Training Fellowship - one of Rob's great strengths was what he termed "grantsmanship." I was also privileged to be amongst those Maudsley Hospital trainees who attended seminars led by Rob in the 1990's in psychopharmacology, receiving insights that no other lecturer could give, owing to his own seminal contribution to the field.

Rob's research and clinical interests spanned from basic to clinical psychopharmacology, pharmacogenetics, pharm-fMRI, pharmaco-economics, and clinical diagnostics. My hope is that those of us whom he has mentored in these fields will work together so that the seeds that he has sown will continue to bear fruit for generations.

Kathy J Aitchison

In the short 10 years that I knew Rob I was always struck by his kindness and thoughtfulness towards others, both patients and colleagues. This was a side to him about which he almost never spoke and yet seemed to me somehow to be at the core of his success and the loyalty he engendered in others. I enjoyed working with him and for him and like many others had been looking forward to the next 10 years of collaboration and discussion. Rob's intellectual brilliance and excellence was frequently remarked upon, often by Rob himself. Certainly I will miss that, with the succinct advice and constructive criticism with which it came. When I think of Rob in the future, however, I will remember most his kindness, reflection, encouragement, loyalty towards others and his primary pride and love for Fiona and their daughters.

Mike Travis

I first met Rob many years ago through an old boyfriend of mine from De La Salle grammar school in Salford (they were school mates). Our friendship was re-kindled when I joined a pharmaceutical company specialising in neuroscience. I always viewed Rob as a friend first and foremost and on his visits to Manchester he enjoyed having a drink in the local pubs in Eccles, mucking in with the locals. Rob never forgot where he came from and he liked to stay in Salford on his business trips. I remember having the privilege to be invited to his inaugural lecture at the Institute and back to Fiona and Rob's home for the party, where I bumped into a old school teacher of Rob's who I knew too.

Rob and I did many medical meetings together over the years and in many places — his expertise and knowledge always secured a full house and he was very generous with his time.

Rob did a road show around the UK about 12 years ago and was insistent that he booked his own transport — this was indeed his light aircraft! During the tour Rob offered to take me on a trip around the UK. We set off from East Midlands airport and had a fabulous trip. However we managed to fly in the flight path of a 747 coming in from Spain and had to move pretty quick!!! Rob blamed me for talking incessantly!!

I have many happy memories of Rob both as a friend and a colleague. He is sorely missed.

Gillian Hales

I first met Rob, over 20yrs ago, whilst I was a post-doc in Professor Brian Meldrum's lab at the Institute of Psychiatry. It was quite by chance that our paths crossed, especially since I was engaged in epilepsy research and Rob was focused on schizophrenia. But it was our joint interest in glutamate pharmacology that led us to investigate glutamate receptor subtypes in post-mortem brains of schizophrenia patients. Not only did this lead to a fruitful collaboration but it was the start of a great friendship with this lovable, yet shy young man. Rob was full of energy and enthusiasm, flitting between his clinic and our lab keen to discuss new ideas; it was hard not to be inspired by him. Of course, Rob will always be remembered for his significant contributions to the field of psychiatry. For me, I have fond memories of our time at the I.O.P. and I will miss his warmth, friendliness and quirky sense of humour.

Smita Price (Patel)

We will always be grateful to Rob for recognizing the importance of the work we were doing on the role of inflammation in neuropsychiatric disease, when this was a forbidden subject. He endorsed his recognition by giving us a home with him in 'clinical neuropharmacology'. Rob's style of management was to respect his colleagues' academic work and judgment, never indulge in minor corrections/ amendments, and treat the necessities of form-filling with the respect it deserved. He stuck to his guns, irrespective of monies and politics. Indeed, he worked to the 'bigger picture', and this was greatly appreciated by the scientists around him. Rob achieved a great deal, and set up even more. We deeply regret that he will not be here to witness the fruition of all his ventures in full, but to Rob the setting up, and giving of momentum, was more important than personal ambition.

Sylvia and John Dobbs

Rob's enthusiasm was always greatest for things that were new. He had unlimited energy and eagerness to explore new opportunities, new medications, new research studies, new scientific discoveries. He threw himself at these openings with an enthusiasm that was infectious and inspiring, and that motivated those who worked with him.

Over the 16 years I worked closely with Rob I saw him inspired by many opportunities, but none more so than what he often referred to as "the culmination" of his "life's work"; the pharmacogenetic prediction of response to antipsychotics. Rob recognised this research as a real and rare opportunity to have a direct impact upon the treatment of patients suffering from schizophrenia. Motivated by this and his excitement for innovation, Rob worked with his characteristic determination and zeal towards the set up of a spin-out company to advance and commercialise this work. In April 2006 his resolve was rewarded with the establishment of TheraGenetics, a spin-out company from King's College London, of which Rob was a co-founder.

Over the past year, and in the recent months since Rob's death, TheraGenetics continues to work towards the goal of personalised medicine based on the years of scientific work in Rob's group. In continuing Rob's work the company is a tribute to his vision and to his determination, but most of all to the unerring enthusiasm and complete conviction with which he faithfully supported those of us who worked with him to realise this goal.

Janet Munro

I worked for Rob since 1993, when I started as a post-doc in his psychiatric genetic team at the Institute of Psychiatry, until his untimely death in February this year. From the very beginning, I found Rob to be a caring, supporting and enthusiastic (sometimes over enthusiastic!) boss. Informing Rob of a possible scientific finding was tantamount to an invitation for frequent hourly visits and discussions over the work in progress. Yet, the most endearing attribute of Rob as a boss was his generosity in recognising everybody's merits, and his readiness to help colleagues in professional or personal difficulties. Many examples can be given of this, including first class tickets paid for out of his own pocket to attend family funerals, sharing funding of his numerous scientific grants, and generously sharing authorship of the many book chapters and reviews that he was frequently asked to write.

Rob was always a very busy person, with many ongoing projects and sometimes little time for routine laboratory meetings. However, he always found the time when the circumstances required it. From the moment that I informed Rob of the possibility of using genetic information for the prediction of response to the antipsychotic clozapine, Rob enthusiastically encouraged and supported the work, resulting in the publication of the first pharmacogenetic test for the prediction of antipsychotic response in the year 2000, a publication of which we were both very proud.

Sadness and disbelief were the most common feelings amongst the many successful PhD students and research assistants that worked in our team over the years, on hearing the sad news of his death. We all agreed that a word of congratulations from Rob meant more than a paper in a top journal. Rob will be greatly missed by all of us who had the opportunity to work with him.

Maria J Arranz

I got to know Rob in 1992 when he was first nominated for a seat on BAP Council. He won a seat in 1994 and the intervening years saw the start of his involvement in many BAP activities. In my administrative role I knew little about his science at that time - I only knew that he was considered exceptional by many people. However his enthusiasm for BAP and his desire for people to think well of him were winning traits as far as I was concerned.

Rob organised and spoke at numerous BAP events of course, but also helped to set up speakers at many more, and put me in touch with lots of people who he knew would further BAP's aims. Rob was also particularly supportive of younger BAP Members and whenever I nagged him to submit travel expenses would say "that's almost another bursary". It was a source of pride to him that he never once claimed any kind of reimbursement from BAP.

Rob undertook different roles and tasks for BAP over the years, many of which were behind-the-scenes and done without thought or any expectation of reward or even acknowledgement, just to help the BAP become the best that it could be. Before BAP had a Secretary of External Affairs, Rob would be one of the first people I would call on when I needed "an expert". I knew that even on the rare occasion that he didn't know the answer he would know someone who would. As Treasurer he was conscientious and personally supportive, trusting me to make decisions on his behalf and always willing to back me up if things got difficult. In fact, I can't remember any occasion when he said 'no' to anything I asked of him, and whenever I was unsure which way to turn he would be there with advice and encouragement. Anything to benefit the BAP.

In losing Rob, we have lost a loyal, enthusiastic and hardworking friend of BAP. I miss him.

Susan Chandler



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