Obituary

Sir Ernest Kennaway

Sir Ernest Kennaway was the doyen of cancer research in Britain, and received international acclaim. Yet not all his scientific life was spent in the cancer field, and we must not forget a whole series of papers, from about 1910 to 1920, which revealed the breadth of his knowledge and interests in chemistry, physiology, and pathology, and which gave a taste of things to come. Certainly, however, it is upon his massive achievements in the sphere of malignant disease that his name and fame are based and will endure. We are fortunate indeed that he left his own characteristic account of the discovery of the cancer-producing hydrocarbons (Brit. Med. J., ii:749–52, 1955), setting forth its history, and making clear the essential part played by the various members of his school at the Cancer Hospital.

All this, and much else, which Kennaway alone inspired, is embodied in numerous papers (many of them classics), in the scientific literature at home and abroad, and most notably in a celebrated series which appeared in the Proceedings of the Royal Society between 1932 and 1942. What undoubtedly emerged from almost 30 years of brilliant work was a satisfying and indeed beautiful correlation between chemical constitution and biological action, whereby the carcinogenic hydrocarbons could clearly be related to the parent substance phenanthrene, in a system suggesting dependence of cancer-producing activity upon certain optimal features of the size, shape, and chemical reactivity of the molecule. But we must not minimize another result, namely, the profound practical influence which was exerted upon the whole of cancer research, and indeed biology widely, from the mere availability of these potent carcinogens, so rendering possible numberless other investigations and additions to knowledge, which could not have been attained without them.

No imagination is needed to see how this career demanded a patient sense of purpose and intensive application, over so many years. Yet even within the cancer field Kennaway showed broad interest and curiosity, and, in addition to his many preoccupations in the laboratory and in administration, he also found time to write papers on a great diversity of other aspects. In many ways he possessed a unique combination of ideal qualities, in his intellectual aptitudes, his chemical sympathy and knowledge, and in his unrivalled skill in applying them to physiology and pathology. Apart from his modern scientific bent he was also a true naturalist, believing greatly in field work and epidemiology. His standards of evidence were rigorous and severe, to the point of austerity. His experimental methods were simple, practical, and decisive, and a delight to watch in execution. He was much less interested in hypotheses, explanations and mechanisms, and, although his own work had lain almost entirely in the chemistry of carcinogenesis, he remained completely open and free to accept any other mechanism or interpretation, provided only that the facts were ascertained, and not an instant before. In addition to all these gifts, he was a master of scientific expression and of English construction.

We have lost a great seeker and searcher, a great discoverer, and scientific worthy. Among his personal attributes and qualities, two things prevailed: first, his profound agnosticism. At the same time, although a supreme skeptic, he worshipped the unvarnished fact when once it had become established. Second was a superb fortitude, which enabled him to conquer the trials and master the vicissitudes not only of illness but of grievous accident, and to continue his researches long after his official retirement and almost to the day of his death.

No appreciation could be complete which failed to refer to a factor at all times apparent to those around him—the part played by Lady Kennaway in every aspect of his life and work. We mourn her loss, as we share her pride, and will ever hold him in grateful remembrance.

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