

James (Jimmy) Wilkinson

Adapted from a segment in "The 1966 Yearbook" ¹

James (known within the family as "Jimmy") was born in Birmingham during the war years, but the worst of the bombing had already taken place (in 1940, 1941 and 1942). Air raids were not an issue, which impacted on the family much after he arrived. He spent his first eight years living in Edgbaston and went to kindergarten and prep school locally. After his father died in 1951 he was sent away to boarding school and a year or so later the family moved to Bristol, which became their home for the next eight years, after which they moved again (to London). He came from a medical family, with both parents and an older half brother having trained in medicine in Birmingham.

He applied to go to one of the London Hospitals (perhaps to break the family tradition of doing medicine in Birmingham?). He did not perform well at interview and was not accepted and so found himself headed for Birmingham (his second choice). He finished secondary school in Bristol in 1961 and joined his sister Jean in the medical school group in Birmingham, who were aiming to graduate in 1966. He started as a "second year", while Jean, who was almost a year older, had started in first year in 1960. Hence they were in the same class.

He spent his university years living in Chancellor's Hall, in Augustus Road in Edgbaston. In his final year he spent three months on a student exchange in Minneapolis, as a visiting undergraduate in the University of Minnesota. After graduating in 1966 he started pre-registration jobs working at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital ("QE"), as house surgeon to Mr. Robert Debenham and Mr. Victor Brookes. Deb retired at the end of 1966 so he was his last HS and attended a retirement party with many former house surgeons, registrars and surgical colleagues. It was at around this time that he came to be called "Jim", rather than Jimmy.



Early in 1967 he moved to the General Hospital as house physician to Prof. John Malins. There he became familiar with the management of diabetes and developed an ambition to pursue hospital medicine as a career.

His third job was as a post-registration house physician at the Children's Hospital, with Dr. Ben Wood and a new paediatrician - Dr. Jack Insley, with a major interest in Genetics. He thoroughly enjoyed this job, in the latter part of 1967, and decided to apply for an RMO job in paediatrics to follow in 1968. He asked Victor Brookes for a reference but Victor expressed the view that he should be pursuing adult medicine as a career rather than paediatrics, which Victor did not have a high opinion of! Jim persuaded him to give him a reference - stating that he hoped to specialise in paediatric cardiology. He was duly offered the RMO job, which would allow him to spend six months doing mainly cardiology, and a second six months at the Maternity Hospital, looking after neonates. In a month's gap between the end of his HP position and the start of the RMO

job he spent time in general practice in Tewkesbury, with his half brother John Wilkinson. He was keen to get a feel for how general practice worked and see it at close quarters - though he had no ambition to enter general practice himself. The exposure was useful and increased his respect for GPs, which he always maintained subsequently.

The first part of the RMO job, starting in February 1968, re-affirmed his interest in paediatric cardiology, in which he worked with Dr. Clifford Parsons and came to develop a major interest in the pathology of congenital heart disease. His registrar was a Spaniard from Madrid, Francisco Acerete, with whom he became firm friends - a friendship which continued over decades thereafter until Francisco's premature death in 1990.

With Francisco he wrote the first draft of a paper on nomenclature of congenital heart disease. His interest in paediatric cardiology was strong enough that he decided at that stage that he would indeed pursue it as a career.

His six months exposure to neonates, working again with Ben Wood and Jack Insley, was enjoyable, albeit hard work and long hours. He started at the old Birmingham Maternity Hospital at Loveday Street, adjacent to the General Hospital. He did some sessions in the neonatal nursery at the QE as well, but the big change that was soon to happen was the opening of the New Birmingham Maternity Hospital on the QE site which was due to take place in September 1968. He spent some time ferrying resuscitation equipment up to the new hospital prior to its opening, so that he would know where to find things when they were needed in a hurry. He also spent many hours, in the time immediately before patients were transferred, putting up temporary curtains in the delivery suite, as the planned curtains had not been delivered in time!

The birth of sextuplets in early October that year (the Thorns sextuplets) brought national media interest and the official opening of the new hospital by the Queen Mother, to whom he was introduced, was another highlight in the weeks that followed the move.

As the RMO job came to an end he started to concentrate on the diploma of Membership of the Royal College of Physicians (MRCP). At that time most aspiring paediatricians took the adult MRCP, as there was no paediatric exam available through the London College. Edinburgh had just started to offer a paediatric version of the exam, but it was not very highly regarded. The "Diploma of Child Health" (DCH) was an option, but it was not seen as equivalent to the MRCP and was more an exam for doctors who were planning to move into general practice.

Like most of his paediatric contemporaries he therefore moved back into adult medicine - starting in early 1969 as a Resident Medical Officer (RMO) at the Midland Centre for Neurology and Neuro-Surgery in Smethwick. He worked with Dr. Edwin Bickerstaff and Dr. Arthur Guest (Neurologists) and with Mr. Jack Small and others in the neurosurgical team. It was an enjoyable six months and opened his eyes to the mysteries of neurology. Here he found himself giving an anaesthetic for an adolescent who had an extradural

haematoma and needed an urgent carotid angiogram - at a time when no anaesthetist was available! Happily the patient survived what was his sole experience of giving a general anaesthetic in his entire career (despite the fact that the patient 'coned' during the procedure!).

He applied for a medical registrar position in Cheltenham, where the senior physician was Dr. Nick Mayne, a former trainee of John Malins, with an interest in Diabetes. He was appointed and started in Cheltenham in August 1969, at the end of his RMO job in Smethwick. Nick became a good friend and they remain in contact 45 years later.

The next eighteen months was a very happy period. He loved the Cotswolds and relished the work, developing more experience managing Diabetes and looking after the coronary care unit, where he put in temporary pacemakers on a number of patients. He took and passed the MRCP part 1 in April 1970, at the first attempt, and passed the MRCP final exam at the end of that year.

Early in 1971 he was appointed as registrar to Dr. Paul Davison and Dr. Bob Nagle at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Birmingham, where he started formal cardiology training in April that year. The following twelve months was immensely valuable and gave him a firm basis in the cardiac catheter laboratory - Paul Davison being a highly skilled cardiac catheterist and an excellent teacher. He also had much more extensive exposure to coronary care and pacemaker management. Paul Davison was a hard taskmaster, being by nature aggressive and acrimonious. He was not well liked by many of his colleagues around the hospital and was feared by most of the junior medical staff. Surprisingly he and Jim got along very well and when the time came, a year later, for Jim to move on to his next position, he made the comment "You know Jim its rather remarkable that we should have got along so well, being two such abrasive people!" Jim, who did not perceive himself as being abrasive, thought this a rather doubtful compliment!

It was during his time at QE in 1971 that he met an Australian Theatre Sister, named Helen Chaplin (but known to most as "Roo"), who was working on Theatre 1 at the QE. Helen was from Sydney and had been traveling in Europe over the previous two years, with the intention of returning to Sydney in 1972. She had been working at the QE intermittently, between her travels. Her sister and brother in law (a Sydney physician with an interest in Diabetes) had come to Birmingham in 1969 where he was to undertake an MD with John Malins. She came over with them and was living in Harborne. Helen and Jim used to meet up, usually with mutual friends, in the Centre Club, where they frequently played squash or swam and usually repaired to the bar for a few beers afterwards.



"Roo"

Early in 1972 there was a skiing excursion planned in an Austrian resort with a number of hospital staff - medical, nursing, technical, etc who were going. Jim booked in for the trip

as also did Helen and some of her friends. The skiing was excellent and the social gatherings were great fun - to the extent that soon after this holiday Helen and Jim began to date regularly and began to discuss the future? Helen's brother in law, Martyn Sulway, was finishing his MD and he and his family were heading back home to Sydney at the end of the year. Helen was expecting to leave at the same time.

Meanwhile Jim was now looking at the next stage of his career and applied for a position as Lecturer in Paediatrics (with Senior Registrar status) in Liverpool. The Professor in Liverpool (John Hay) was a paediatric cardiologist and his hope was that, if appointed, this job would allow him to use his previous training in paediatrics, with his interest in the pathology of congenital heart disease, and his adult cardiology training to move into paediatric cardiology? He was appointed to this position in April 1972, and was required to start in Liverpool on 1st August that year.

He went up to Liverpool, with Helen to look at the city and the prospects for somewhere to live? Initially he was able to rent accommodation in a flat adjacent to the home of one of the paediatric cardiologists (Dr. Richard Jones) and this proved very satisfactory for a few months. Before the start of the new job Jim and Helen became officially engaged and began planning their wedding, which was timed to take place before her sister and



brother in law departed home, so that they could be present.

They were married on November 18th that year and Helen moved up to Liverpool soon after and started work at the Royal Liverpool Children's Hospital within a few weeks. They had purchased a new flat in a block on the edge of Calderstones Park and they moved there early in the New Year of 1973.

His return to paediatrics was relatively smooth. Initially he concentrated on getting exposure to a range of general paediatrics, with limited exposure to cardiology. However the accent changed over the following twelve months and by the end of 1973 he was heavily involved with cardiology, including an increasing exposure to research in the area of pathology of congenital heart defects. In this endeavour he was greatly helped by the fact that there was an active research program already in place in the Institute of Child Health, with a visiting anatomy lecturer (Dr Robert Anderson) from Manchester University who had done his MD with Prof. Hay and was spending regular time in Liverpool. Bob Anderson, who became an internationally renowned figure in cardiac morphology, and Jim collaborated extensively over the next four decades.

Jim and Helen celebrated the arrival of their first child in October 1973 - Dominic. Jim applied for consultant positions in Birmingham and Liverpool, without success, but was appointed to a year's locum position in Liverpool, when the new consultant (Bob Arnold) departed for a year in Toronto from late June 1974. Jim started working as a consultant (locum) in mid 1974, being then aged 30. During this time another of the Liverpool team

left and he was appointed to succeed in that position from August 1st 1975, with only a five week gap between the end of his locum and the start of the substantive position.

A few days before he started work, Helen gave birth to twin boys (Matthew and Oliver) bringing the family up to five - in a two bedroom flat! The flat became very cramped and new accommodation became an urgent requirement.

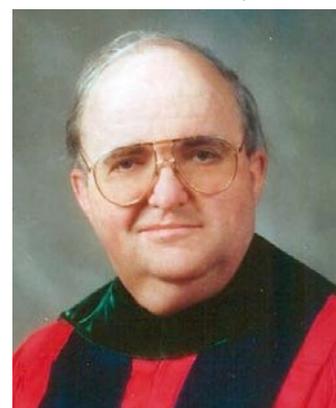
They moved into a house, in a nearby suburb, in April the following year, where the family expanded further in June 1977, with the arrival of son number four (Edward).



For the next ten years they remained in Liverpool, and Helen returned to part time work in the operating theatres from 1981, with Jim moving up the ladder in the department and becoming the Director of the Cardiac Unit in late 1986.

Early in 1987 he was invited to apply for the position of Director of Cardiology at The Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne and he and Helen travelled to Australia, in July that year, to look at the hospital and to discuss the proposition. He decided to accept the offer, which came through formally in August and the family made the move to Australia in January 1988.

Over the next few years he oversaw the establishment of the first paediatric heart transplant program in Australia, the development of an active academic department with a strong fellowship training program and the initiation of a number of interventional procedures. He became a Fellow of the American College of Cardiology (FACC). He mentored many paediatric cardiac interventionists and proctored the commencement of such procedures in paediatric and adult catheter laboratories all over Australia and in many south east Asian centres. He served as a member of Council of the Cardiac Society of Australia and New Zealand for a number of years and was the paediatric representative on the cardiology training committee of the Royal Australasian College of Physicians.



FACC

He was the director of cardiology, at the Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne, until 2001 when he handed over the role to a colleague who he had trained and mentored

towards this position in the 1990s. Soon after handing over the post of Director of the Cardiology Department he took on another role as chairman of the organising committee for the World Congress of Paediatric Cardiology and Cardiac Surgery which was to take place in Cairns, Queensland, in June 2009, after which he expected to retire (being by then 65 years old).

Having stepped back from running the department he took on the role of chairman of medical staff for the hospital. In this position he oversaw many changes, including the approval of funding for a new hospital and agreement to the siting of the new building.

He was appointed a professor, in the department of paediatrics, in 2005 and he spent most of the next four years on preparations for the World Congress in 2009.

After the World Congress had finished, in June 2009, he had expected to retire. However he was invited to continue working part-time, doing outpatient work and teaching of medical students and postgraduates. Over the following two years he watched the progress of the building of the new hospital and in November 2011 the hospital moved into its new buildings, which had been officially opened a few weeks earlier by Her Majesty the Queen.

He remained a part time member of the team until August 2012, when he handed over his 3 sessions to allow the appointment of Dr. Lucas Eastaugh to the department as a new Interventional Cardiologist.

Thereafter he continued to work on an irregular basis doing a small number of outpatient clinics, some peripheral clinics and regular teaching of residents and Fellows, but gradually winding back with a view to dropping most of these activities after his 70th birthday in August 2013. In that year he, with help from many of his medical student colleagues, published the "1966 Yearbook" ¹, with the stories of many of his medical school contemporaries. He coordinated and edited the volume and produced an electronic version of the book. This brief biography is adapted from his personal segment in the book.



Dominic awarded D Phil
Oxford (2009)

Helen and he pursue a range of leisure interests - travelling, reading, golf, walking, playing Cello (Helen) and researching family history.

Their four sons, who consider themselves to be Australians, all did their tertiary studies (and most of their secondary education) in Australia.

The eldest (Dominic) is a neonatologist and ethicist in Oxford and previously an Associate Professor of Neonatal Medicine and Bioethics in Adelaide.

The older twin (Matthew) is an orthopedic Surgeon in Townsville, Queensland.

His twin brother (Oliver) is a Vet in Cheltenham, England and a highly rated open water swimmer. He holds the world record for the "Manhattan Island Marathon Swim" (MIMS - 46 km) - for which he has an entry in the Guinness Book of World Records.



The youngest (Edward) is a diplomat, who is on an overseas posting having recently finished a 3 year spell in Canberra. Prior to that he spent three years as Australian Vice Consul / Consul in Los Angeles.

Jim and Helen have seven grandchildren ranging in age from 3 to 13 years old.



Penelope, Jemima, Gabriel, Sebastian, Nicholas, Thomas, Angus

In Ivanhoe. Christmas and New Year 2010/2011

1. The Birmingham Medical School. 1966 Yearbook. Pam Sim, Charles (Humph) Browne and Jimmy Wilkinson. Creative Media, University of Birmingham. June 2013.