

Johnson et al. 2010: Supplementary Material 7

Edited transcript of interview with Barbara Rashbass by Martin Johnson on 15th October 2009 in the Anatomy School, Cambridge

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Speaker key

MHJ Martin Johnson
BR Barbara Rashbass

MHJ Maybe if we could just start with your career history at the MRC - when you went there, where you came from, how you got there. Some background and so on.

BR Well, in short, I applied for a job as a medical officer.

MHJ That was in...?

BR 1968.

MHJ Yes.

BR And was promoted to a SMO in, I think, 75. And then to a PMO in 82. And I stayed there till 87.

MHJ You were content there?

BR Content.

MHJ So, Sir John Gray or John Gray as he was, was head of MRC when you arrived and then James Gowans...?

BR No, Himsworth was there.

MHJ Himsworth, so he must – Gray came in very shortly...

BR Very shortly afterwards.

MHJ Yes, okay. And did you have any dealings with Gray at all?

BR Yes.

MHJ What was he like?

BR Very nice. And he was in fact instrumental in establishing the Mammalian Development Unit [at University College, London] as a directly supported team as opposed to an indirectly supported team.

MHJ Well, that was in about what 1974, 75 wasn't it?

BR Something like that.. I had been in discussions with Anne McClaren about support for her team in mammalian development, and I think John Gray was persuaded to recommend to Council that Anne's team be set up as a unit directly supported, as opposed to a programme grant. And that I think was the key. John's judgment was very well founded.

MHJ So, was he a passionate or strong supporter of the basic science rather than its clinically applied role or would that be unfair?

BR He decided every case on its merits was the impression I got.

MHJ There was certainly a group that looked at policy in the reproductive sciences in the late 60s, in the early 70s.

BR That was a key group.

MHJ For like three years, which was clearly a very important group.

BR It was a very important group.

MHJ We've looked their papers extensively. And they formulated a policy for research in obstetrics and gynaecology as it was called.

BR Absolutely.

MHJ Which seemed very sound?

BR Mmm, that was key.

MHJ And that was influential, I think, yes?

BR I think the setting up of those scientific committees was very important.

MHJ In the papers early on, there's a reference to a difficult case of a Doctor Scales, and Duncan Thomas was asked to ask you how it was resolved. This was in 1970, because apparently some of the things that Bob Edwards was proposing in these early days reminded people of this case of Doctor Scales who'd been...

BR Do you remember, can you tell me a little more about it?

MHJ No, because the reference is to the difficult case of a Doctor Scales who was trying to bridge the scientific and clinical divide. So, there were patients involved and so on, you know, that was what the reference was. And you had apparently dealt with Doctor Scales successfully, and we can't find any other reference to it, and I just wondered - on the off chance. It's not terribly important.

BR I remember the name.

MHJ One of the issues that came up quite early on, because what Bob [Edwards] and Patrick [Steptoe] were offering to the MRC, quite clearly fitted in some ways the policy that that working group [on Reproductive Physiology] had developed, which was they wanted a scientist and a clinician to collaborate in research in a very effective area. And it was quite clear from the papers that Malcolm Godfrey saw this instantly and saw this as a possibility. Now one of the things that was also going on at the same time was the Clinical Research Centre [CRC] in Northwick Park. So, they [CRC] were trying to recruit - Graham Bull [its director] was trying to recruit - someone to head the developmental obstetrics section there. Were you involved at all in that?

BR Yes

MHJ Yes, can you tell us what was going on there?

BR I think it was seen at one stage that there would be three major centres for reproductive biology, Edinburgh with [Roger] Short's unit, and the CRC being two of them. And Oxford, that was Turnbull.

MHJ Well Turnbull was then in Cardiff, but he moved to Oxford shortly thereafter, yes?

BR That's right, yes. And then the decision was taken not to back the CRC to the great extent that Bull had wanted, and Oxford was chosen as one.

MHJ And, we know that Bull was trying to recruit a senior person to start that unit and had a lot of problems doing so. Were you aware of the fact that Bull offered Edwards and Steptoe a placement there, he offered them the headship and the running of that unit?

BR They declined it for their own reasons.

MHJ Yes. But the reasons that were given were that they preferred the freedom that working in the University of Cambridge gave, I mean, those were the expressed reasons. I think the sub-text is that the stimulation and so on they got from colleagues around them, or Bob got from colleagues around him in Cambridge was greater than he thought he would get at the CRC in Northwick Park. I know Edwards went there [to CRC], I think in - in December of 1970, I think it was. I can vaguely remember that because I was a graduate student, I remember there were interactions with it, because Barnes, Ron Barnes and Maureen Tuffrey were there, and they were - there was a lot of to-ing and fro-ing.

BR I got involved with the CRC a bit later.

MHJ Well, you may not have known, but can I – can we discuss it a little bit because that decision not to go there was rather crucial I think. Now I could offer you a what-if scenario. If they had taken the opportunities there, they had beds, they had backup, they had all they needed in one place and so on, what freedom do you think they then would've had to do the sort of work that they did without the MRC funding subsequently? So, like the growing of embryos, the transferring of embryos into women, the laparoscopic recovery of eggs and so on, that they were proposing to do as part of their work there?

BR I think that there would've been great emphasis on the ethics. But if the case were made, it would be made on scientific grounds in exactly the same way as if they were applying for any sort of support from the MRC, whether direct or indirect. I mean, the MRC was always very good at making judgements on scientific grounds.

MHJ So, was it curious then that – when they didn't go that route [ie via the CRC] and they went the route of putting in a long-term support application, that the rejection was not on scientific grounds, the stated objections, they were entirely ethical?

BR That would be entirely ad edum with my recollection of the MRC at that stage. It was cautious.

MHJ But it appears to conflict with what you've just said, that they made – the MRC made - its decision on a scientific case, not...

BR Well, it did normally, but the ethics always override the science, don't they?

MHJ What was interesting though, was that the proposal that Bull saw, that Howarth saw, that Godfrey saw in those preliminary talks that made them suggest they'd be offered the post, both of them be offered the post, at CRC, is essentially the same proposal that was subsequently turned down on ethical grounds, which had already been seen by a couple of referees, both of whom raised ethical issues, but in rather minor ways and one of whom gave ethical justification which was subsequently never picked up on. So, what they ended up turning down on ethical grounds was in fact what Bob and Patrick had been offered positions to do. So, you can understand that maybe Bob felt mystified when they subsequently turned around and said no, having offered him, both of them, jobs.

BR I wasn't aware of it.

MHJ Okay. Can I ask you about the ethical review process at the CRC? Do you know what was involved?

BR They had their internal committee, it was taken very seriously.

MHJ Did they take lay-people on?

BR I don't remember the details.

MHJ I mean, certainly what I've read in a reply Bull gave to this question, was that there were three consultants, who were not engaged with research, on the ethic committee.

BR I don't know.

MHJ Well, it was - the MRC came so close to funding this work, but it's sort of tantalising when you go through it, because I don't think this has come out particularly before, it's certainly new to me. It is quite clear that Edwards thought, having offered them [the CRC positions], the MRC really liked the work and he was encouraged therefore in a paradoxical way not to go there, but to put in for [long term programme grant] support.

BR Which they then turned down.

MHJ Which they then turned down. Mmm, okay. Right, then it moved rather rapidly, because I think Edwards contacted MRC - moved much more rapidly than it would be today I suspect - because Edwards contacted them in August, I think his preliminary proposal went in in September, October. It was given preliminary reviews which were thought to be especially encouraging - encouraging them to proceed to make the CRC offer which was made in early December. That was then turned down. The actual full application went in in February. And then the decision not to fund came I think in April of 71, so it was pretty compressed. Were you aware...?

BR I don't think I was involved at that stage.

MHJ You weren't involved?

BR I'm not sure when I actually switched to the CRC perhaps I heard about it subsequently.

MHJ But at the time it didn't impact on you?

BR No.

MHJ Did you pick up on any concern later within the MRC that they may have got it wrong at any stage?

BR No.

MHJ So they were absolutely convinced that they got it right?

BR Well, I didn't pick up any vibes at all, either yes or no.

MHJ Okay, all right. Okay. And there was – did you pick up any vibes about Bob and Patrick's use of the media and talking to the television or papers?

BR No.

MHJ Okay. In 1974 Gray gave a press conference, the Annual [Report] press conference, at which he articulated what became a de facto MRC policy on IVF research and so on. Do you know why that came up in 1974 at that conference, because there was...?

BR Can you just remind me when Anne McClaren's unit was set up?

MHJ Well, I think that was 1974, 75 – it was around that time.

BR I think he would've talked with her and obviously his support for her unit was one of the factors that led him to take the view that he expressed at the press conference.

MHJ Yes, I mean, there was discussion in the MRC papers leading up to the press conference about questions they might be asked about IVF.

BR Yes.

MHJ So, did they tend to come up every – frequently questioning about IVF?

BR In general there was very careful preparation.

MHJ Sort of trying to foresee issues.

BR Absolutely.

MHJ I mean, one thing that did happen earlier that year was at the BMA conference. Bevis claimed there were test tube babies already born in England, and I wondered whether it was anticipating that rather than particularly relating to Anne's unit, which I don't think was mentioned in the earlier report here.

BR No.

MHJ Okay. Right. Now in 1975, when I think you probably were involved, the Cell Board set up a review of human [in vitro] fertilisation chaired by [Roger] Short, with Anne McLaren, [Walter] Bodmer, and Ian Cooke on it. Do you remember that, did you have anything to do with that?

BR Probably not...

MHJ Okay. Do you know why the decision was taken to set that committee up at that stage?

BR No. Just probably that it was topical. Short, I can't remember when his unit was set up, is he still alive?

MHJ Yes, I saw him later this year; we have interviewed him, yes.

BR Yes, well you'll know from him. They were a very good group. And they had a very positive influence. Ian Cooke as well.

MHJ Yes, well this was a small group set up by the Cell Board, and it's not quite clear why it was set up then, what the stimulus was?

BR Well, Roger would... I'm sure ...

MHJ Do you think he drove it probably?

BR I don't know who drove it - the scientists talk together - it might've been felt that it was timely.

MHJ The Cell Board took the report, looked at it, didn't like it, put it on hold. I mean, the exact wording is...

BR Who was Chairman of the Cell Board at the time?

MHJ I can't remember. I think we've got that somewhere. I mean, the report said that there should be no objection to obtaining ova from women for research purposes provided that there are defined medical reasons for opening the abdomen, and provided women give their consent. There should be no objections to in vitro fertilisation of human ova obtained in this way. There should be no legal or ethical objection to transfer of in vitro ova to the uterus - this should only be carried out in patients who are being carefully selected beforehand and any pregnancy resulting should be carefully monitored by ultrasound, amniocentesis and serial hormone assays. And then something on the anonymity of offspring. And then says - their last point is that - improved techniques of tubal surgery are likely to be of much more immediate and lasting benefit and more cost effective for the treatment. So, those points in a sense were in conflict with the policy that Gray had enunciated the previous year at the press conference?

BR Well, that may be why it was... but Mary, Dame...?

MHJ Mary Warnock.

BR Mary Warnock. There were consultations with her.

MHJ At that stage? And this is – this is ten years before her report, this is 74 [not 1984]?

BR I haven't got the timing straight, but I remember her views were taken note of whether directly or indirectly I don't know.

MHJ By this sub-group?

BR I don't know, but I have sat at meetings wearing an MRC hat at which Mary Warnock was present or was taking a leading role. So - she's still alive?

MHJ Yes, we've interviewed her mostly about later things, but it didn't come out as she'd had this interest ten years before and...

BR I don't know about that, but I mean by 85 they'd already moved me off that area.

MHJ But this is 75?

BR I think it must've been earlier that I perhaps was taking account of her views. I mean, the MRC was a cautious organisation.

MHJ Yes. So, in general you would characterise it as cautious, because I mean, this was challenging Gray's policy as enunciated the previous year at the press conference.

BR Which was cautious.

MHJ Which was cautious, yes. But that was essentially reiterating the grounds that had been given to Edwards and Steptoe for not funding them. And now they have an internal committee led by actually one of the referees that had made these criticisms of Edwards and Steptoe, which is Short, saying that they should be allowed to do exactly the things that Edwards and Steptoe were not – were being told was unethical still at the same time.

BR Well you see, it does fit together. Perhaps the MRC thought that Edwards and Steptoe were going too far, but the Mammalian Development Unit still pursuing research under Anne, would perhaps be a more cautious sensible way to proceed. So, from that point of view the – what actually happened makes sense policy wise.

MHJ Well yes, what actually happened was this report was put on the shelf, so that was – it was the cautious response.

BR It was the cautious response, but on the other hand they [the MRC] had set up Anne McLaren's unit, which was at a more basic level.

MHJ Yes, Short clearly wanted to move into this area from other papers [we have seen], so he – I think he later recanted on his objections that he put to Bob Edwards, because he wanted to go into interspecific fertilisation of hamster eggs [with human

sperm] and so on and that sort of things. So, I don't know whether it was him or Anne, possibly it was the two of them together, who pushed this. And Bodmer had worked on an ethics group with Edwards and others looking at the ethical issues. So, they were probably seen as now pushing the limits, and I think this report was probably seen as pushing the limits, they're going a bit far and a bit fast.

BR I would've thought that would tally with everything. It would tally with the press conference, it would tally with the action to support Anne directly, I mean, continuing with research, but not going as far. Does that make sense?

MHJ Yes, that makes sense and I think it really is very useful to explore it because, I mean, that's the conclusion we had sort of come to I think, so it's very useful. And Roy Calne [Liver transplants] may have been another one, which was pushing the limits rather far.

BR In a sense the committee structure militates - because you gravitate towards the mean? Is that not a fair point?

MHJ No, I think it's absolutely a fair point, and I think that - I mean, that is why that one window that of the CRC had Patrick and Bob taking that option. That was a real risk in a sense. I mean it met a need; it clearly met a need that Bull was having trouble filling. It fitted - sort of - with strategic policies, so it could be justified in that way. And it offered Edwards and Steptoe a publicly funded national health hospital base to do that work. If they'd taken that, the whole course sort of thing may have gone differently. You know, it's extraordinary the way this shines through. And that was in a sense an imaginative leap that could be done within that framework because a few individuals were driving it. The moment it went into a committee, you could see it getting bogged down. So, would it be fair to say that because the policy on research in gynaecology had been agreed by a deliberative process, and because the formation of the CRC, had been made by a deliberative process, that made it much easier for them to offer Edwards and Steptoe that route, because it all appeared to conform to the deliberative strategy even though it was taking a risk?

BR That was what the CRC was set up for.

MHJ I think it's the general opinion that the CRC never really worked partly because of its location probably, and partly because of the way it was directed. This has been very helpful. You picked up on matters to do with Anne [McLaren], from the moment her unit came [into being], didn't you?

BR Mmm.

MHJ So, your name sort of appears significantly in the [archival] papers towards the end, about towards in 1978 when it's clear the rumours are going round about Louise Brown and so on. When you wrote to Elizabeth Cloak at the DHSS, this was on the 6th of April 1978, in which you are responding to a request from her [Cloak] about whether or

not the Council received an application from Dr Steptoe and Dr Edwards. And you fill them in on the background. So, I imagine that that means the DHSS was getting a bit worried about all the press attention that was going on and the fact that it hadn't been supported by the DHSS and the MRC, although the media was...

BR I don't know what the Department's view. I think I didn't read anything into it about getting worried.

MHJ So, it was just providing them with the information?

BR I'd just provided them with information.

MHJ Yes, okay. Right. Okay. So, you don't know what prompted this request?

BR No.

MHJ There's a letter from Anne [McLaren] to you in reply to a letter you had sent concerning in vitro fertilisation and embryo transfer. So, this is from the 3rd of July by here, so it followed up...

BR That year being 70...?

MHJ 1978.

BR 78.

MHJ Yes. So, again this is around the time when Louise Brown was being born and you wrote to Anne in May actually and she's responding in July, so, there's quite a lag here, in which she is telling you about her views on IVF and whether the MRC should fund it. Again, do you know why you wrote to her asking this?

BR Well because she was eminent in the field and her views were very well thought of. So this would be a letter for the Board and/or Council.

MHJ So, had they requested this or...?

BR Well, it would be in regard to some application which went forward, it wouldn't have come just cold. I would've written to Anne because a view was needed. – can I see it?

MHJ Yes, sure. It's a little bit difficult to read.

BR And we haven't got my letter?

MHJ No.

BR No. There you are, 'you were raising in your letter the question of whether the

time is now right for a review to be undertaken on policy. The present Council's view on in vitro fertilisation is, as you say, that researching a human should not be funded in this field unless satisfactory evidence is provided, there would be no increased risk of abnormal offspring.' That's the key.

MHJ That's the press conference statement.

BR Yes.

MHJ That Gray made in 74.

BR Yes.

MHJ And she then goes on to refer to the 1975 working group.

BR Yes.

MHJ And it was a slightly ambiguous letter that Anne was writing there, because she's being very political I think, if you read it.

BR Yes.

MHJ She's treading a delicate line I think?

BR Yes. Well, I haven't got time to read it. But there was no policy.

MHJ Well there was – the policy was the one that Gray had enunciated really.

BR Yes, but she says there's no need for a review.

MHJ Yes. That's what she says, but then if you look elsewhere, she's sort of suggesting there is. So, that's why I think it's somewhat ambivalent.

BR Yes she's sitting on the fence.

MHJ She's sort of sitting on the fence on this I think yes, and trying to be...

BR Yes, not reading the first part of her letter.

MHJ And then later that year again, after Louise Brown had been born, later that month, there was a summary by someone called Saroja Ramaswany?

BR Yes, Saroja Ramaswany was a medical officer who worked in my group under Sheila Howarth.

MHJ This is a sort of quite lengthy summary of Council - development of Council

policy, it includes some of the earlier stuff.

BR But that's quite useful if it's a summary.

MHJ So, there's a sort of flurry of activity around the time of Louise Brown's pregnancy being in the press.

BR Well, that's because – you can understand why, can't you?

MHJ Mmm?

BR Because it looks as though the MRC missed a trick.

MHJ Yes, well that's what the Department of Health is saying, because they wrote to the MRC, the new Secretary of State, it was then a Labour Government and said, can you give me an update on what the MRC did because the Secretary of State is coming under some pressure to answer questions in the House [of Commons]. So, there's clearly the momentum as well then.

BR It's justifying why the MRC took a certain line which was cautious and ethical but events overtook them. And looking back, it looks as though they missed a trick, and they are now trying to defend their position to show that the MRC were not incorrect in taking the cautious line they did.

MHJ It's curious in a sense because they could have said, well we did offer them a place in Northwick Park and they turned it down? Or it may be then they knew Bob Edwards might come back and say, well having offered me, but why did they then turn me down subsequently, you know? But there was a defensible argument I think there, so it's quite interesting. But we're hypothesising again.

BR I have no recollection.

MHJ Yes, okay. Confidentiality about grant decisions and other funding bodies, what was the policy at MRC? If you turned something down and another funding body asked you about the project when it was submitted elsewhere, was it policy to...

BR I don't remember that happening.

MHJ Right, okay. So, there was no particular policy?

BR I don't think there was any policy.

MHJ Okay. So, around 78, 79 with the birth of Louise Brown, the MRC then changed its policy [on IVF] rather quickly over a period of about six or eight months. And then became a very wholehearted supporter of this work because they funded me and Peter Braude. I think we got the first major funding for working on human embryos and so on.

And there was clearly a major change in policy at that point. Gray had gone by then, Gowans was in, so that may have made it easier perhaps. I wonder, did you have any sort of feelings having worked through this period, that the experience of not funding the IVF changed the way the MRC did anything subsequently? Or whether they looked at it and said, you know, in retrospect it could be that we got this wrong. Did we, is there anything we should change?

BR I don't remember.

MHJ Okay. Is there anything else I should've asked you?

BR I don't think so.