

John C. P. Williams of Williams-Beuren syndrome

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Abstract John C.P. Williams of New Zealand, whose name is associated with Williams-Beuren syndrome, spent his known professional career primarily in cardiovascular research. His disappearance in the mid-1970s and his later life remain a mystery.

Keywords Williams · Beuren · History of medicine

Introduction

The resurgence of research on Williams-Beuren syndrome (WBS) has spurred interest in other contributions of Dr. John Cyprian Phipps Williams and in the man himself. Much of this curiosity comes from parents who have a child with Williams syndrome, especially since Kit Crawford, a parent of one of

the children described in Williams' classic 1961 paper, reported in 1999 that Williams had not been seen since he boarded a train en route to take a position at the Mayo Clinic. Crawford reported that Dr. Williams never claimed his suitcase at a London luggage office, never appeared at the Mayo Clinic, and had not been seen since (www.wsf.org).

A discussion of the evolution of Williams-Beuren syndrome precedes this paper [1]. Spurred on by Dr. Walter E. Berdon's interest in presenting material on WBS for readers of *Pediatric Radiology*, we did not find it difficult to learn that Williams actually did take a job at the Mayo Clinic, and furthermore, it was in the laboratory of the renowned physiologist, Earl H. Wood (Fig. 1). Williams began working in Rochester in the fall of 1962 and he kept his connection with the clinic through 1968 (Appendix). One reason we succeeded in our search for Dr. Williams was his two unusual middle names—"Cyprian Phipps." Using current Internet and medical search engines, it would have been most difficult to obtain information about him had we searched for the relatively common name "John Williams." Searching for "J.C.P. Williams" greatly simplified our work, and from some of these citations, and through contacts we had from colleagues in New Zealand, we found scholars and friends of Dr. Williams who had known him and who provided us with their recollections. This paper summarizes information that we were able to gather, primarily about Dr. Williams' academic pursuits (Appendix).

Discussion

The individuals whom we have interviewed and who knew J.C.P. Williams generally agree that he was a talented and engaging person. An examination of his publications shows a wide range of interests in cardiology and basic science. To readers concerned specifically with WBS, it is interesting

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Fig. 1 Photograph taken at the Mayo Clinic in 1965. From left to right, research colleagues with John C.P. Williams (*arrow*) are Ralph Sturm, Joan Frank, Clark Nolan and Lucy Cronin (Photograph supplied by E. Andrew Wood)

that he published no further papers regarding that syndrome. Also, we were surprised to learn that none of his immediate colleagues at the Mayo Clinic or those elsewhere whom we interviewed were aware of his classic 1961 paper on the syndrome, nor recalled him ever discussing the subject (personal communications). Those colleagues also agree that Williams was private and exhibited a number of recurrent odd behaviors at work, even more so as he moved from one place to another.

Is he alive today? All that we can say for sure is that after he left the Mayo Clinic and University College London, some friends and colleagues recall meeting him in Europe, the last encounters occurring in Salzburg, Austria, during the mid-1970s (personal communications). After Interpol, at the request of Williams' sister, could not find Dr. Williams in Europe, the High Court of New Zealand, on Oct. 14, 1988, declared him "a missing person presumed to be dead from 1978" (High Court of New Zealand, Rotorua Registry M122/88). In a biography of New Zealand author Janet Frame, Michael King gives convincing evidence that Williams was alive in 2000 [2]. If Dr. Williams were alive today, he would be 88 years old.

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Appendix Curriculum Vitae

Name: John Cyprian Phipps Williams

Date and place of Birth: November 16, 1922, Wellington, New Zealand

Academic Institutions attended, degrees awarded, and year of award:

Bachelor of Science, 1945. Victoria College, University of New Zealand

Bachelor of Arts, 1947. Victoria College, University of New Zealand

Bachelor of Medicine, Bachelor of Surgery, 1953. Otago Medical School (Dunedin), University of New Zealand

Postgraduate Diploma: Member of the Royal Australasian College of Physicians (MRACP) Fellow (1978)

Positions held (position, place, years):

1954–1955 House surgeon (Intern), Auckland Hospital, NZ

1955 Thames Hospital, NZ

1956–1962 Auckland and Green Lane Hospitals, Auckland, NZ. Appointed cardiology consultant Green Lane Hospital 1963

Oct. 1, 1962, to Sept. 30, 1965. N.I.H. Postdoctoral Fellow in Cardiovascular Physiology in Laboratory of Professor E.A. Wood, Mayo Clinic, Rochester, MN, USA

Oct. 1, 1965, to Sept. 30, 1966. Consultant with Professor E.A. Wood, Mayo Clinic, Rochester, MN, USA

Oct. 1, 1966, to Oct. 1, 1968. Laboratory of Professor A.F. Huxley at University College London, UK; also associated with Mayo Clinic through 1968

Position formally offered and declined:

1972. Agreed to accept job offered by Dr. Homer Warner at Latter Day Saints Hospital, Salt Lake City, but later changed his mind.

Honor: Plunket Oratory Medal from Victoria University, NZ (1944)

Publications

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