

Obituary



David F Horrobin

Physiologist; founder of two biotechnology companies; outspoken critic of the scientific process.

Born Oct 6, 1939, in Bolton, UK; died of pneumonia while undergoing treatment for mantle cell lymphoma aged 63 years in Edinburgh, UK, on April 1, 2003.

David Horrobin's career was shaped by the study, early on, of prolactin. In 1969, just out of internship, he was appointed professor of medical physiology at the then-new medical school in Nairobi, Kenya, a country he had fallen in love with during 4 months spent as a member of the Flying Doctor Service in medical school. While there, he was mesmerised by a lecture by prolactin researcher Howard Bern, a distinguished zoologist at the University of California at Berkeley. Horrobin set out to study the hormone, first on himself. "I started the investigation by injecting prolactin into myself and found that, just as in salmon, it helped to regulate the kidneys and to keep salt and water in balance, especially in difficult conditions", he would later write in his book *The Madness of Adam and Eve*, which was short-listed for the Aventis Science Book of the Year in 2002. "Moreover, I and the male colleagues into whom I injected the hormone, developed a transient male version of premenstrual syndrome!"

This work, Horrobin wrote, sparked his interest in three areas: how ancient man managed salt and water in East Africa; schizophrenia research, because all antipsychotic drugs at the time stimulated release of prolactin; and fats, because prolactin stimulates the release of essential fatty acids from cells. In 1972, he returned to the UK to become a reader in medical physiology at the University of Newcastle, where he studied essential fatty acids and prostaglandins. In 1975, he became professor of medicine at the University of Montreal, Canada, where he became involved in the study of lipids, but was unable to obtain grants for his research from mainstream sources. That experience led him to begin an analysis of the peer-review system, which led to a series of incisive articles in journals, including *JAMA*, *The Lancet*, and *Trends in Pharmacological Sciences*.

Horrobin left academia in 1979 to found Efamol, a small pharmaceutical company that later changed its name to Scotia and became one of the first biotechnology companies to be listed on the London Stock Exchange. He remained at Scotia until 1997, developing therapies based on lipid biochemistry and photodynamic methods, including Epogam, which received approval for use in atopic eczema in 1988. But his heart remained in psychiatric research, and in 1997 he left to found a new company, Laxdale, based in Stirling, Scotland, which develops treatments for psychiatric and neurodegenerative diseases.

The common thread of Horrobin's diverse interests and accomplishments, a former student and then colleague of more than 30 years, Mehar S Manku, told *The Lancet*, was "his boldness and energy to face up to critics and push on to provide provisions and ambience to express ideas, openly and freely. He was a naturalist, scientist, and a medical doctor with a commitment to discovering simple drugs for complex diseases."

Horrobin also personally invested in the future of biomedical research, drawing on his own experience of mantle cell lymphoma to call for changes in the conduct and design of clinical trials in a Personal paper in *The Lancet* earlier this year (*Lancet* 2003; **361**: 695–97). He was also concerned that inefficiencies in drug development could lead to active compounds being missed—for example, he was critical of the way "that the assays for therapeutic activity were conducted in a wholly artificial environment on microplates, which bore no relationship to the physiological environment", according to Manku.

Horrobin attended King's College School in Wimbledon, London, then Balliol College, Oxford University. He led the Oxford University Expedition to Nepal to study human blood groups and then interrupted his course to complete a DPhil in neurophysiology, earning his BM BCh in 1968. He would eventually write, or coauthor, some 800 articles and serve as founder and editor of *Medical Hypotheses* and of *Prostaglandins, Leukotrienes, and Essential Fatty Acids*. He enjoyed fishing off the western coast of the Isle of Harris, reading, and writing poetry, and is survived by his wife Sherri, his mother Betty, his brother Peter, his children, Cathra and Steven, and three grandchildren.

Despite his strong work ethic, Horrobin's sense of humour shined. In *The Madness of Adam and Eve*, he wrote about receiving a call in Kenya from the US ambassador to that country, asking if he could organise an audience for the lecture by Bern, which would figure so prominently in his career. Horrobin and Mohamed Hyder, the professor of zoology, "were the only academics around but we ensured Howard's audience by collecting cleaners, catering, and office staff into the main lecture theatre. Mohamed and I were the only two people who understood Howard's lecture. Only 10 years later, to his great amusement, did I tell Howard what had happened."

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