

## **Professor Sir Abraham Goldberg**

### **Physician, scientist and academic**

Professor Sir Abraham Goldberg, who has died aged 83, was one of the most outstanding physician scientists of his generation.

Known to all as Abe, Abraham Goldberg was born to immigrant parents from Lithuania and the Ukraine. He excelled throughout his life as a doctor, scientist, teacher, mentor, supporter of good causes and as a dedicated family man.

It was as a young boy at primary school in Edinburgh that he fell seriously ill with rheumatic fever, a disease whose late effects 70 years later were to lead to the stroke which so disabled him in the final year of his life.

A distinguished pupil at George Heriot's, Goldberg won the Crichton scholarship to Edinburgh University medical school, where he was taught and influenced by a number of luminaries, including Sir Sydney Smith, the forensic science pioneer and Jamieson, the renowned anatomist. He graduated in 1946 and a few months later, in 1946, was conscripted into the Royal Army Medical Corps and served two years in Egypt as Senior Medical Officer, rising to the rank of Major.

Despite his outstanding academic record he had difficulty securing his first medical training job locally. After six months at Withington Hospital Manchester and a period as house physician in Halifax, Yorkshire, he completed his pre-registration training back in Edinburgh at the Royal Hospital for Sick Children, a post which he later described as a "baptism of fire" and the hardest job he had ever had to do. Speaking in 1986, he told how he was left to cope alone-newly qualified and inexperienced-since the hospital's registrars were on Army duty.

Wishing to pursue an academic career, he was awarded a Nuffield research fellowship in 1952 in the department of chemical pathology at University College Hospital Medical School in London, working with the renowned biochemist Professor Claude Rimington FRS. It was there- often working in the laboratory until the early hours of the morning- that he acquired the laboratory research skills and scientific rigour that underpinned his future research into abnormalities of the blood pigment, haem, which cause the various debilitating manifestations of porphyria.

This post led to an Eli Lilly fellowship at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City to work in Salt Lake City with Professor Max Wintrobe, one of the outstanding haematologists of that era: Abe there performed the research that would help establish him as an authority in his field. He enjoyed his time in America but his egalitarian spirit was not at ease with the inequities of its healthcare system and, in 1957, he was recruited by Professor Edward Wayne, later Sir Edward, as lecturer in the department of medicine of Glasgow University at the Western Infirmary. A year earlier, Edinburgh University had awarded Abe the gold medal for his MD thesis on porphyria.

In 1956 he also met Clarice, a woman of great charm who was to be his partner and supporter for the rest of his life. After a two-week romance they got engaged and were married nine months later on September 3, 1957.

Goldberg's academic career prospered in Glasgow. Publishing more than 250 papers he became not only a world authority on porphyria, but also on lead poisoning and was influential in achieving a safer water supply for Glasgow. He also conducted important studies into the mechanisms of the noxious effects of alcohol. This sustained academic output was rewarded with a senior lectureship, readership, then, in 1967, a personal chair in the department of medicine at Glasgow University, when he also became the director of the Medical Research Council's group on iron and porphyrin metabolism at the Western Infirmary.

His interests in clinical pharmacology and toxicology strengthened with the growing awareness, to which he contributed, that many prescription and even herbal medicines could cause porphyria. In

1970 he succeeded Stanley Alstead as Regius Professor of Materia Medica at Glasgow University, based at Stobhill Hospital, which gave him the opportunity to build up his department with young academics. In 1971 he was made a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh. Among his young academics at Stobhill was Brian Whiting, later to become Dean of the Faculty of Medicine, with whom he worked to produce the so-called drug interaction disc, which was distributed to all practicing doctors in the UK. It was also during his tenure of the Chair of Materia Medica that his leadership and expertise as a clinician scientist was recognised by his chairmanship of the Biomedical Research Committee of the Chief Scientists Office, Scottish Home and Health Department, and his membership and in 1973 his chairmanship of the clinical research board of the Medical Research Council.

Abe's final appointment was as Regius Professor of the Practice of Medicine in Glasgow University at the Western Infirmary in 1978, where a major focus of his activity was to be the modernisation of medical undergraduate teaching by the production of entirely new audio-visual teaching materials. It was also during this busy period that he was invited to be chairman of the Committee on Safety of Medicines (CSM) in London. Goldberg was acutely aware of the importance of this committee, which had only recently been formed in the wake of the thalidomide drug toxicity disaster. He became renowned for his encyclopaedic knowledge of the voluminous papers which would arrive in their familiar 'green bags'. Unfortunately, he fell victim to the type of television journalism that favours drama over facts in a BBC *Panorama* programme about Opren, a drug for arthritis that caused liver disease. This showed the CSM and, in his position as Chairman, Abe himself, in an unfavourable light which was as unfair as it was deeply depressing for him. Nevertheless, he rallied through this difficult period, indeed, with cross-party support for his Chairmanship of the CSM in the House of Commons, and was rightly honoured with a knighthood, conferred in 1983 for his many services to medicine.

As well as being a highly regarded clinician and outstanding researcher, Abe had a passion for teaching. A considerable amount of time was spent with the medical students and junior medical staff imparting his knowledge and enthusiasm for medicine. He ensured that teaching was given a high priority in his Unit and throughout the Glasgow hospitals. In 1962, during his Editorship of the *Scottish Medical Journal*, he initiated a special series on Scottish Medical Education. Abe will be forever remembered for his "dermatome dance", a routine which he had invented to help the students remember the nerve supply of the skin in different regions of their body, which involved them placing their hands on different parts of their body while reciting the corresponding nerve supply. It is often stated that doctors are more interested in the diseases from which their patients suffer than in the patients themselves, but this was not true in Abe's case. He took a personal interest in his patients who suffered from acute porphyria, sending every one of them a Christmas card right up until the year of his death, eighteen years after retiring.

Always teaching that research should be fun, Abe inspired a generation of medical researchers. Like every successful professional his work was his hobby. Sometimes his research fellows found his lateral thinking difficult to follow. However, that was part of his genius. As a truly original thinker he had the gift of being able to look at what everyone else was looking at and see what nobody else could see. He had the ability to ask penetrating questions which could open up an entirely new area of research. Abe had a remarkable memory, something which junior staff discovered to their peril when he would ask for the results of a test he had requested several weeks earlier and which had not been adequately prioritised. He retained his keen memory all his years.

Chronic back pain plagued Abe through most of his life. It inhibited his ability to travel and forced him to relinquish his election to President of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons in Glasgow. His chronic pain gave him a special ability to relate to the suffering of many of the patients under his care. Despite his back pain, he accepted the invitation to become Founder President of the Faculty of Pharmaceutical Medicine of the Royal Colleges of Physicians of the United Kingdom, a role which he presided over from 1989 to 1991.

Abe lived in interesting times. His medical celebrity brought him many prizes, eponymous lectureships and several overseas visits. Memoirs of those times spent in the Middle East during Israel's birth pangs (when he met David Ben-Gurion, the Israeli prime minister), and of being in South Africa during apartheid, tell much about Goldberg's abhorrence of discrimination and his passion for fairness in the world.

Success such as his has to be won in an often hostile environment in which certain personal characteristics must be displayed appropriately. Ambition, energy, passion, tenacity and single-mindedness made him either famous or notorious depending on where one stood with him.

Retirement was an opportunity fully to indulge his passion for history and his gift for creative writing, which he had revealed during his career by the publication of many non-medical articles in newspapers and magazines. He also gave generously of his time in charitable works, including the promotion of a better understanding between those of his faith and others.

Abe was a staunch family man. Despite his huge workload, he remained close to and engaged with his family. He recognised and often stated that medicine was a very jealous mistress consuming much of his time and energy. However, he always asserted that his wife and family were his greatest blessing. He referred to them as his true crown. He recounted how his family expanded his life by increasing his experience of joy and pain. He regularly took his two boys David and Richard to see Celtic play in Glasgow. His practical genius even enabled him to combine quality time with his family with his professional duties. He regularly brought his two young boys on his Saturday morning ward round which started at mid-day.

Abe was remarkable for the breadth as well as the extent of his achievements. In this respect he was the last of a breed of professors of medicine. He excelled as a clinician, researcher, teacher and administrator. His influence which extended from his own medical unit throughout the whole hospital, his city, his country and internationally. His influence lives on through the many changes he introduced and through the many people who have had the privilege to work alongside him. He was honoured in his home country and city as well as abroad. In 1989, the year of his retirement, he received the City of Glasgow Lord Provost's Award for public service. A year earlier he had given the Fitzpatrick Lecture of the Royal College of Physicians of London on the history of European medicine. It was in such public lectures that he was able to convey his great love of history. After delivering the Goodall Memorial Lecture of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons in Glasgow on James VI and I, he was appointed Honorary Senior (later Professorial) Research Fellow in the Department of Modern History at the University of Glasgow. He continued in his retirement to write papers and deliver public lectures on a range of topics, including Dreyfus, Theodore Herzl, Weizmann, Wilberforce and Glasgow Medicine in 1900.

Abe was always aware of the treasure he had in his wife Clarice. He was buried 50 years to the minute of his marriage to her. She survives him, together with his three children, David, Jennifer and Richard and four grandchildren.

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***Abraham Goldberg Kt, MB, ChB, MD (Edinburgh), DSc(Glasgow), FRCPGlas, FRCPE, FRCP, FFPM. Born December 7, 1923; Elected FRSE 1 March 1971, Died September 1, 2007.***