Preface

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The choice of subjects and authors for this Festschrift for Professor Otto Wolff who retired as Nuffield Professor of Child Health and Dean of the Institute of Child Health in the University of London on September 30th 1985, has been at the same time very easy and exceedingly difficult. Easy because Otto Wolff's own research in the fields of childhood obesity, the various disorders of lipoprotein metabolism, and in phenylketonuria has been outstanding and won him national and international recognition, and because all his colleagues agreed immediately and enthusiastically to participate in this adventure. Difficult because Otto's breadth of knowledge and interest, and his influence on so many aspects of child health both in this country and abroad far exceeds the capabilities of any of us to do justice to the many and varied contributions he has made in a lifetime of academic paediatric practice, first in Birmingham and then in London.

An editor must of course accept responsibility for the choice of subjects and format of any publication and I do that unreservedly. Obesity and the prevention of coronary heart disease reflect some of Otto's earliest but continuing research interests. The exciting advances in our understanding of vitamin E and neurological function arose out of the meticulous study of a rare disorder, a lesson that Otto was to impress on all who had the privilege of working with him. Amines, pteridines and their relevance to neurological damage stem from the steady accumulation of patients referred for treatment of phenylketonuria and illustrate the advantage of establishing centres for the investigation and management of complex problems – another area of special concern to Otto.

An unrelenting determination to get to the bottom of every clinical problem has been a hallmark of Otto's practice and woe betide any house officer, registrar or senior colleague who did not appreciate this. When confronted with a dysmorphic baby in Birmingham in the very early days of chromosomal analysis it was therefore not surprising that Dr Otto Wolff should call upon Dr (now Professor) John Edwards for a chromosomal analysis of what has subsequently become known as Edwards' syndrome. Colleagues in the Clinical Genetics Department at the Institute of Child Health bring us up to date on more recently recognised chromosomal defects.

It is not always easy for a superb all round clinician to appreciate when specialisation in his subject is necessary and pick the right moment to foster it. Outstanding examples of how this should be done have been in Otto's unit in the fields of paediatric gastroenterology, and in some of the other inborn errors of metabolism.

No man is an island, no academic department or institution should become isolated, and the Tropical Child Health Unit with its world wide contributions to child health, and the education of those responsible for the delivery of care to children in less advantaged countries, has been another of Otto's major achievements. From Bombay to Bogota there will be found ex-students of the Institute of Child Health who will remember Otto Wolff with gratitude not only for the inspiration that enabled him to provide the springboard for David Morley and Zef Ebrahim, but also for the warm hospitality so evident in the wonderful dinner parties given by him and Jill at their home. What matter that after dinner coffee was taken squashed between two grand pianos and a spinette, when the preceding meal had been in candlelit elegance and of a quality surpassing most restaurants, and with every dietary requirement satisfied. Anyway, the friendship was what really mattered and what lasted.

If he had to, one wonders which of his achievements Otto would rank first. Fortunately he is not asked to undertake this impossible task, but very high up must come his remarkable ability to appreciate the emotional problems of children and their parents, and the importance of this area of paediatric practice. Not only has he helped countless families but he has also taught many paediatricians and child psychiatrists the true nature of collaboration. In a lecture on 'The High-Achieving Child' Bryan Lask told the story of a child referred to him by Otto in whom there appeared to be no psychological cause for the symptoms. The patient had of course been meticulously investigated, but Bryan sent him back saying 'try a little harder' to which we gather Otto did not take too kindly but immediately complied. Needless to say Otto in the end was right, but then he is a high-achieving adult!

With all its imperfections and omissions then this Festschrift, written by a few friends and colleagues, but expressing the gratitude of many more, comes to honour the career of a remarkable man, to whom a generation of children and paediatricians owe more than they know.

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