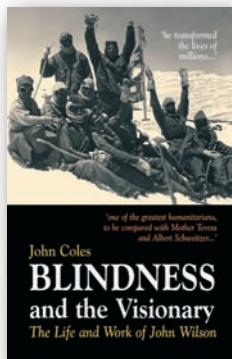


Book review



Blindness and the visionary: the life and work of John Wilson

Author: John Coles, published June 2006.

Reviewed by Andrew Elkington, Chairman, The British Council for Prevention of Blindness.

When I was young, my father did not allow me to accept a chemistry set as a present. He was a doctor in general

practice and had heard of a twelve-year-old boy losing the sight of both eyes in an explosion at school, caused by the chemicals he was using being mislabeled. That boy was John Wilson. He grew up to be a man who conquered his own disability and transformed the lives of literally millions of people in a similar predicament. This book is a fascinating account of how this was done.

The author has been chairman of Sightsavers International (SSI) for the past five years. Earlier, he had a distinguished career in the diplomatic service, including being Ambassador to Jordan, High Commissioner to Australia, and holding senior posts in Europe and the Foreign Office. All this has equipped him to put Sir John Wilson's life in an interesting perspective.

The reader of the book should, however, take note of what the author writes in the preface. He never met John Wilson. In piecing together the story he tells, he has necessarily relied upon the generosity of the Wilson family, the views of many of Sir John's friends and colleagues, and an enormous amount of archival material. The subject of this biography was a prolific writer and much sought-after speaker, and these activities led to the accumulation of numerous publications. Moreover, for many years, he kept a diary in braille. Later in life he dictated excerpts on tape, taking the opportunity to add comments. All this has allowed the author to marshal a huge amount of factual information and it is fortunate that his background enables him to present this in a manageable form. I rarely found these passages indigestible, and the student of the evolution of the many national societies, both for and of people who are blind, will treasure the myriad details.

Most biographies take a chronological format. This account is different. Whilst the first two chapters follow the traditional pattern, chapters 3 and 4 deal with the themes of John Wilson's work in Africa and Asia. The next two chapters cover the later part of his life in general terms, whilst chapter 7 explores Sir John the man. Finally, there is a section on his legacy, which I found particularly fascinating.

So much for the mechanics of the book. What did I learn? The reader should remember that any reviewer's choice is personal, but for me the following points stood out. First, as an ophthalmologist, it was

hurtful and humbling for me to learn that John Wilson was angered that he had not been told the truth about the extent of his eye injuries. He evidently felt that his being allowed to hope that some useful vision might return, when this was obviously not the case, was cruel. Then there was his determination to overcome his disability. He was gifted intellectually and this, combined with hard work, led to his gaining a place at Oxford University. He rowed for his college. All this fits in with his attitude that those who are blind "are normal people who cannot see." His resilience was remarkable. He had "a stamina that compels admiration." Another trait was the way in which he encouraged and supported others. In this connection, readers of the CEHJ will be interested to learn that he strongly backed Professor Barrie Jones's initiative in setting up the International Centre for Eye Health. This book traces Sir John moving from an emphasis on rehabilitation to one on prevention, a concept that the Centre enshrines. It also describes his progressive interest in preventing disability in general. His hearing gradually failed, allegedly because the antibiotics used to treat an attack of amoebic dysentery proved toxic, and this, no doubt, spurred him on to help deaf people, who, it is claimed, outnumber people who are blind.

Lady Wilson plays a pivotal role in this narrative, not only as a devoted wife of 55 years, and the mother of their two children, but also as a professional colleague. She coined the description 'river blindness' for onchocerciasis. She is a historian by training, and with a charm that led to the income of SSI increasing ten-fold when she was in charge of fundraising. Her skill as a photographer greatly helped in this respect.

It is good to have documented the many awards that Sir John received. What gave him most pleasure was becoming an Honorary Doctor of Civil Law of his old university. The Head of his College described him as perhaps the most remarkable of the College's alumni: "A man without sight, with a worldwide vision."

I met Sir John only once. He spoke in the Royal Albert Hall to an audience of over three thousand. We were all riveted. You could have heard a pin drop. At the reception afterwards he was the life and soul of the party, being particularly interested in the views of the young people present. Then I was introduced: a privilege I shall never forget. I did not mention the chemistry set.

Blindness and the visionary: the life and work of John Wilson is published by Royal National Institute for the Blind. It is also available as a CD-ROM for people with sight problems. Price: UK £16.99

Obituary

Jock Anderson FRCS OBE

It is with regret that we report the death of Dr John DC Anderson, better known to his many friends and colleagues as 'Jock', on June 16, 2006.

Jock was born on August 21, 1924, in Lincolnshire, UK, where he spent his early childhood. He later attended Bedford School and went on to work as an electronics engineer during the war years. He then studied medicine at Cambridge University and, while completing his training at the Middlesex Hospital, London, he met his wife, Gwendy.

In 1955, they left for Asia to work, firstly at the Church Mission Society Hospital in Quetta, Pakistan, and, later, the Christian Medical College in Ludhiana, India. Jock was deeply concerned for the enormous number of visually impaired people without access to medical care. He realised a dream when, in 1960, a mobile 'caravan hospital', shipped from the UK, brought ophthalmic and general medical services to many thousands in the Sindh Province of Pakistan. In 1967 Jock moved to Kabul, Afghanistan, where he helped to set up the first eye hospital, trained doctors and nurses, and established eye camps.

Jock joined the newly formed Department of Preventive Ophthalmology (International Centre for Eye Health) at the Institute of Ophthalmology/Moorfields Eye Hospital, London, in 1981. He conducted pioneering research based on surveys in Somali refugee camps, in Zanzibar and Eastern Sudan. During his time at ICEH he was much involved in the teaching programme, and he and Gwendy showed warm and caring hospitality to many overseas students, whose cultural concerns they fully understood after their years in Asia.

Despite spending the last fourteen years of his life in a wheelchair, due to paraplegia caused by a spinal tumour, Jock remained a cheerful, positive and gracious person, sustained by his steadfast faith.

Past and present staff and students at ICEH will remember Jock with much affection and gratitude and we convey our deepest sympathy to Gwendy and their three children and nine grandchildren.

Sue Stevens



Dr Jock Anderson receives an honorary diploma in Community Eye Health by Her Royal Highness, The Princess Royal, during her visit to the International Centre for Eye Health in 1988. UK

Courses and conferences

The Inaugural World Congress on Refractive Error and Service Development

Theme: Meeting the Challenges of Refractive Errors in the 21st Century. **Date:** 14-16 March, 2007. **Venue:** The International Convention Centre, Durban, South Africa. **Hosted by:** The International Centre for Eyecare Education (ICEE). **Scientific programme:** Sessions include the latest in clinical issues, public health developments and research to address this major cause of visual impairment and blindness and meet the VISION 2020 goal of eliminating avoidable blindness by the year 2020. Latest developments in correcting and treating refractive errors with spectacles, contact lenses and refractive surgery will be discussed as well as programme and community developmental efforts on how to address refractive blindness worldwide.

Information: www.icee.org

Eighth General Assembly of the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness

Theme: Excellence and Equity in Eye Care. **Date:** July 28-August 2, 2008. **Venue:** Centro de Convenções Rebouças, Sao Paulo, Brazil. Email: agency@lvpei.org

International Ophthalmic Nurses Association Annual Conference

Date: 30-31 March 2007. **Venue:** University of Swansea, South Wales, UK. **Information:** Northern Network Events. Email: iona@glasconf.demon.co.uk

Bridging Communities and Eye Care Providers to Achieve VISION 2020 in Africa

Date: November 13-17, 2006. **Venue:** Kilimanjaro Centre for Community Ophthalmology, Tanzania. **Objectives:** To meet VISION 2020 goals, developing and implementing better strategies for bridging communities and hospitals will be essential. This course will provide eye care programme managers with the skills necessary to develop, implement, and monitor strategies for increasing utilisation of services by the population in need. **Target audience:** Eye care programme managers (MoH, NGO, service groups), trainers, key decision-makers of national prevention of blindness programmes. **Information and admission procedures:** Genes Mng'anya, KCCO Courses Administrator – Email: genes@kcco.net Course supported by Seva Foundation

Organisational & Financial Management to Achieve VISION 2020 in Africa

Date: November 20-December 1, 2006. **Venue:** Kilimanjaro Centre for Community Ophthalmology, Tanzania. **Course objective:** To provide practical (African-tested) strategies for either developing or strengthening management systems to facilitate increased efficiency, coverage, and satisfaction with eye care services. **Target audience:** The heads and key decision-makers of VISION 2020 planning areas. **Information and admission procedures:** Genes Mng'anya – Email genes@kcco.net. Course supported by Fred Hollows Foundation

Short Course in Tropical Ophthalmology

Date: 21-23 November, 2006. **Venue:** International Centre for Eye Health at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, 8 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3RE, UK. **Course aims and objectives:** The primary purpose of the course will be to familiarise participants with the main causes of blindness in the world, with emphasis on the tropics. This will be done through review of the clinical presentation and management of the following diseases: trachoma, onchocerciasis, vitamin A deficiency and measles, ophthalmia neonatorum, leprosy, and HIV and the eye. The workshop programme will also introduce participants to the Global VISION 2020 Initiative and its implementation through the VISION 2020: The Right to Sight programme. One of the goals of the Global

Initiative is to reduce childhood blindness from its present level of 0.75 per 1,000 children to 0.4 per 1,000 children by the year 2020. The main focus of the VISION 2020: The Right to Sight Global Initiative is to create adequate eye care facilities within communities, particularly in underprivileged areas; to develop human resources so that well-trained eye care workers are available; and to implement specific programmes to control the major causes of blindness. **Target audience:** Ophthalmologists, from the UK and overseas, who wish to gain knowledge on eye diseases found in the tropics. **Information and admission procedures:** Applications for this workshop are available on the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine's website www.Lshtm.ac.uk/prospectus/short/sto.html or contact Emma Sydenham – Email: emma.sydenham@Lshtm.ac.uk



Twenty-six participants from 16 countries attended the annual short course on 'Planning for VISION 2020' run by the International Centre for Eye Health at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine from 3-7 July, 2006. The participants worked in teams to develop a model for eye care interventions in their selected regions. Those interested in applying for future short courses should email Shortcourses@Lshtm.ac.uk

New resources available

Technology Guidelines for a District Eye Care Programme

This is a new publication from the VISION 2020 Technology Working Group, aimed at all eye care personnel providing services at district level. The document gives guidance on the personnel, equipment, consumables, and supplies needed for an eye care programme serving a population of about 500,000. Estimates are given for the numbers and types of personnel required for the base hospital, the satellite units, and at primary level. Suggested ophthalmic items are drawn from the *Standard List for a VISION 2020 Eye Care Service Unit*, and approximate quantities given.

District programmes will be in various stages of development, so some of the more sophisticated and expensive items are marked 'Essential' or 'If Funds Available'. Some cost estimates are given for budgeting purposes. A section is included on ordering and stock management, with sample forms which can be adapted to local circumstances, and a list of items for simple preventative maintenance of equipment is also included.

The Technology Guidelines for a District Eye Care Programme (plus the *Standard List for a VISION 2020 Eye Care Service Unit*) can be downloaded from www.v2020.org or www.iceh.org.uk Print copies are available, free of charge for developing countries, from: International Resource Centre, International Centre for Eye Health (address on page 34) Fax: +44 (0)20 7958 8317. Email: sue.stevens@Lshtm.ac.uk