

## Horace Evans: royal physician

When I was a medical student and then a young surgeon, three physicians in this country were very widely known, not only by members of the medical profession but by very large numbers of the general public. All three were Royal physicians: Lord Dawson of Penn, of the London Hospital, physician to four kings, who died in 1945; Lord Horder, of St. Bartholomew's, who died in 1955; and Baron Evans, also of the London, who died in 1963, 50 years ago, and is the subject of this month's article.

Horace Evans was a 'general physician', the type that has all but disappeared in this country today, and his life was an interesting one.

Horace Evans was a Welshman, born in 1903 in Dowlais, near Merthyr Tydfil. His father was a distinguished musician who became conductor of the Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra. Horace was educated at Liverpool College, the Guildhall School of Music and the City of London School. He entered the London Hospital Medical College with a science scholarship. It has to be said that his student career was quite unremarkable. He obtained his conjoint diploma of MRCS, LRCP in 1925 but, and this I am sure will encourage some of the readers of this article, failed his MRCP at the first attempt. However, he did satisfy the examiners in 1930, obtaining his MD by examination in the same year.

In spite of his lack of early academic distinction, there were obviously some hidden qualities in young Horace in that, on qualification, he was selected by Professor (later Sir) Arthur Ellis as house physician to the medical unit at the London, following which he held a series of junior appointments at the hospital – surgery, obstetrics, anaesthesia and pathology – which provided a broad training for his subsequent career as a general physician.

It was Arthur Ellis (1883–1966) who did much to support Evans' early career,

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appointing him assistant director of the medical unit in 1933. Ellis was a Canadian who became the foundation professor of medicine at the London. In 1943 he moved to Oxford as the regius professor of medicine. He is remembered today for his extensive clinical and pathological studies of Bright's disease, in which he was assisted by Evans. As a medical student at Oxford, I had to learn Ellis's classification, which has now passed into history and which I have now completely forgotten.

In 1933, Evans was appointed assistant director of the professorial medical unit at the London, under Ellis. Here he carried out meticulous clinical research into nephritis and its relationship to hypertension. Much of this work was incorporated into Ellis's Croonian lectures on the natural history of Bright's disease delivered at the Royal College of Physicians in 1941, in wartime London. It is interesting that Ellis had the ability of recognizing special promise in students and young doctors. He selected Evans at an early stage in his career when he showed no particular evidence of academic ability. From Ellis he learned the importance of careful and unhurried history taking and examination combined with a profound suspicion of dogma.

In 1936, Evans was appointed assistant physician at the London and became full physician in 1947. He also served on the consultant staff of numerous other hospitals and institutions, including the Royal Navy.

In 1946, on the recommendation of Lord Webb Johnson, the then President of the Royal College of Surgeons, Evans was appointed physician to Queen Mary, in succession to Lord Dawson of Penn, who had died the year before.

In 1949, Evans became physician to King George VI. In this capacity, he was one of the team who looked after the King in what was first considered to be 'unresolved pneumonia' – a diagnosis that would be frowned upon today. A subsequent, delayed bronchoscopy revealed a carcinoma of the lung and a successful pneumonectomy was carried out by Mr (later Sir) Clement Price Thomas, of

Westminster Hospital, a revered very senior colleague of mine.

Poor King George. He was a lifetime heavy cigarette smoker. Go along and inspect his well-known portrait in the National Portrait Gallery in London, where he is posed informally with his wife and daughters – he is shown with a cigarette clasped between his fingers. He developed successively intermittent claudication, treated in those days by a lumbar sympathectomy, a carcinoma of the lung and finally died in his sleep of what was almost certainly a coronary thrombosis. Truly a martyr to tobacco in the days before its lethal consequences were appreciated.

From 1952 until his death, Evans was physician to Queen Elizabeth II. Evans's services to the Royal family were recognized by a knighthood (KCVO) in 1949 and by being created Baron Evans of Merthyr Tydfil in 1957.

Horace Evans was a gifted physician with a clinical instinct that seemed uncanny. He was also an excellent and popular bedside teacher, both of students and postgraduates. He was one of the last general physicians, whose opinion and advice was sought after on any type of 'difficult case'. In a lecture in 1958 he said:

**'Have you noticed how your patients watch you with an intensity rarely given, even to an actress? Every word you utter, every action you make has a special significance for good or ill, which carries an impression perhaps undreamed of. A sick patient is peculiarly sensitive to any word or action which is not completely sincere. The slightest suggestion of any insincerity can create frustration and despair.'**

Teachers of communication skills, please note.

In 1962, Horace Evans underwent major abdominal surgery. For a time he was able to resume limited work, but he had to be re-admitted to hospital within a few months and died in October 1963 at the age of 60 years. **BJHM**

*Conflict of interest: none.*