

## Mince, Tatties and Apoptosis

The year was 1971, the place 45 Don Street, Old Aberdeen and the time was teatime.

Picture a table around which sat my father, mother, their five children and my grandmother. I was the eldest, a medical student at Aberdeen University, and my sister Maggie, seven years my junior, was the youngest. Dad was Alastair Currie, Regius Professor of Pathology at Aberdeen.

As a third year student, I had just started Pathology and had the privilege of being taught by my father. He was regarded by both his students and his peers as an exceptional teacher. During the course of tea that particular evening, Dad started asking me about mitosis and what I understood about the specific cell process. There were the expected derogatory remarks about talking shop from the non-medical members of the family. My father countered this by saying that he had discovered a cell process which resulted in little black dots in the cell nucleus and that it might be important. As we all ate our mince and tatties, he went on to explain that what he had found was hitherto unknown. This process was, in his opinion, opposite to but complimentary with mitosis. As he had no name for this process, the next day he would consult with the professors of Greek and Latin in an attempt to find one suitable.

The following evening, over Shepherd's Pie, he told us that the professor of Greek had come up with the name Apoptosis, which roughly translated as the falling of dead leaves from a tree. The black dots Dad had described were called apoptotic bodies. The majority of medical opinion, at that time, did not support this hypothesis but in the past six years Apoptosis, programmed cell death, has become an accepted cell process, opening up many key areas of research, particularly into malignant disease.

As so often happens in areas of profound research, the researcher, in this case my father, has not survived to see the fruits of his labours, succumbing himself to the very disease he was endeavouring to understand and cure.

He started out in life as the eldest son of a baker on the island of Islay, and at the age of ten he left to start his secondary education at Glasgow High School. At the age of sixteen, he had attained the necessary qualifications for entry to medical school but was deemed too young, and therefore did a BSc prior to medical school. Following a distinguished undergraduate career he decided to become a pathologist, rising quickly through the academic ranks to the Chair of Pathology in Aberdeen in 1962. After an exhaustive headhunt, he was appointed to the Chair of Pathology in Edinburgh in the early Seventies.

For his contributions to Cancer research he was, deservedly, awarded a knighthood in 1979. In the early Nineties, he was bestowed the honour of the Presidency of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, the only medical man this century to hold this prestigious position.

For his discovery of and research into Apoptosis, it is widely accepted that Professor Sir Alastair Currie - our Dad - should have been awarded the Nobel Prize for Medicine. Unfortunately, this award is not given posthumously.

To conclude, the next time you sit down to a meal of mince and tatties, listen to what the "old man" has to say, for you may never know what will transpire.

*John Currie,*

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