

Leon M Gerlis, MRCS LRCP, MBBS, FRCPath

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Formerly Visiting Professor of Cardiac Pathology, Imperial College London, and Honorary Consultant in Cardiac Histopathology, Royal Brompton Hospital, London.

The Leon Gerlis Museum of Cardiac Pathology and Morphology at the Royal Brompton Hospital was opened on 28 October 2003. In some ways, this event marked for the few of us who were closely involved in the establishment of the museum a milestone in recognising the value of historically retained organs for the purposes of education and research. Leon had always championed the usefulness of mounted museum specimens for teaching.(1) Despite the development of ever more sophisticated electronic formats, there is nothing that can match physically having the specimen in hand to view it from different perspectives. Leon dedicated nearly four years on expertly cataloguing, documenting and illustrating nearly three hundred museum preparations. Half of the cases are congenitally malformed hearts without previous surgical repair which are particularly instructive for trainees who are setting out to become future specialists in congenital heart disease. Some of the cases date back more than a hundred years and some are unique such as the case of a WW1 soldier who had lived with a bullet in his heart for 55 years.(2) This extensive educational resource exhibiting the most illustrative cases of cardiovascular pathology is Leon's main legacy for Pathology. His other notable legacy lies in nearly a hundred publications comprising of review articles, papers in journals and chapters in books, and two books, based on research into congenital heart disease spanning the ages from fetus to adults, in human and in zoological specimens. Several, for example papers on "macaroni arteriopathy", hearts of conjoined twins, and the persistent fifth aortic arch, have become 'must cite' papers by subsequent researchers working on these rare or under recognised diseases.

Compared to many other subspecialties of Pathology, Cardiovascular Pathology (and Morphology) is far from glamorous. But, it has many followers since it is deemed fundamental knowledge for workers in Cardiology, Cardiac Surgery, Congenital Heart, Paediatrics, Neonatology, and so on. The number of specialists in this field is relatively small and losing Leon is a huge loss to the community. Leon was one of the early pioneers in UK, an unsung hero who taught a great many people from all over the world.

Leon's career spanned over 6 decades and I am privileged to have worked with him for the last two decades until May 2007 when, at the age of 87 years, he hung up his lab coat in our Cardiac Morphology Unit for the final time. I very much appreciate his contributions to the work of the unit over the years. I'll always remember him as a gentleman of the 'old school' with time for everyone (and every cat), and his sense of humour. Greeting and stroking cats that he encountered on his way to the underground station was a particular delight in his journey to work. He was a keen teacher and kindly despite his occasional bark "If I'm a train, you'd have missed me!" to students who turn up late for his tutorials. Leon was enormously proud of his children and grandchildren but never boastful. He quietly beavered away researching in great detail all the historical papers relating to whichever topic he was working on, without the help of electronic search engines. He had often remarked that, as far as he knew, hard work had never killed anyone, setting an example for us all. In his eighties, he adapted to using the computer for e-mails and presentations proficiently as well as using voice-recognition software for dictations. Soon after his last retirement, I was astonished to receive an invitation to join his social media page! Leon certainly kept up with the times.

[References

(1) Gerlis LM. Cardiac museum specimens in London. *Heart* 1996;75:71.

(2) Gerlis LM. Bizzare presentation and long survival after a gunshot wound involving the heart. *Int J Cardiol* 2006;108:408-9]

Prof. Yen Ho
Head, Cardiac Morphology Unit
Royal Brompton Hospital

Additional appreciation from Prof Gaetano Thiene, University of Padova, Italy

"Leon belonged to the generation of cardiac pathologists before the era of segmental analysis of congenital heart defects and modern pediatric cardiology - cardiac surgery. However, this does not detract from the merit of a meticulous description of cardiac malformations. He wrote an important page in the science of cardiac teratology."



Leon at work soon after graduation and Leon at work in 2006 just prior to his final retirement.



Leon with Yen in 2008