

Thank you very much for everyone's generous comments. I only hope you all believe them. I should retire more often. I have a lot of people to thank.

Let me start by thanking Asthma UK who appointed me in 1988 to one of its 2 Professorial chairs. It has since supported a small group of core staff to help me build capacity and over the years has also funded many of our research projects through its usual competitive process.

I have seen the Charity grow in stature and influence and it has been a privilege to be one of its vice presidents.

Asthma UK is of course much more than a research organisation it is about helping asthmatic patients. Mary Spinks is an example. I first met Mary and her husband Henry shortly after my appointment and they have been strong supporters of asthma research and our department over the years. Mary was the originator of the successful annual Starlight Ball that was held at the Hilton for many years to raise funds for Asthma Research. I am delighted that she is so much better from her asthma because it enabled her to embark on an exhausting journey over the last few years to establish, as Director, the Primrose Centre providing invaluable services to patients with breast cancer and their families.

While I am on the subject of key Asthma UK supporters I am delighted that Julian and Francesca Schild, Lady Fiona Fowler and Selina Thistleton-Smith are also with us today. They have been very supportive of Asthma UK and the work of our Centre.

I also thank the numerous sponsors for this event: GSK, Merck Sharpe and Dohme, Novartis and the Allergy Academy (with its sponsors).

It's strange how minor events in life's journey sometimes end up with such major impact. In 1980 I was a respiratory registrar at Guy's working for Tim Clark. It was necessary for career progression in those days to register for a MD or a PhD research degree. I wrote to Professor Margaret Turner-Warwick because I was interested in fibrosing alveolitis. Margaret replied that this new Professor had just come to NHLI from Edinburgh and why don't I go and see him. I duly arrived in Barry's office in my best Sunday suit ready for an interview. Barry arrived a little late – looking youthful, in his jeans and a screw driver in his hand....I wasn't sure he was the Professor or the janitor but I felt he was someone I could work with! I had planned to do 2 years of research only but three decades or more later I am still here.

I really appreciate that many of you have come such long distances - Europe, USA, Canada, HK, Singapore and Australia! All of you have been very special to me and I thank you for your inspiration and friendship. Our shared journey in discovery bonds us together in ways that nothing else can.

We have had a terrific day of science! Thanks very much to our speakers and Chairs. Seldom does one have so many of the world's top asthma scientists in

one room and I am very grateful to Seb, Jana and Juliana for orchestrating the day. Jana has been a terrific Centre manager. Its not easy working across two institutions but she has coped with it magnificently.

While the excuse for having this symposium is my retirement, today is after all a scientific meeting to hear about exciting developments in asthma research. The title of the symposium is actually taken from Asthma UK's mission statement. I could never do justice to the stimulating science and concepts presented so I won't even try to summarize. Only time will tell how and whether these research directions will improve health care but we will certainly have learned a lot on the journey.

One of the fun things at retirement is that you can say all manner of things – they either turn out to be right in which case you are seen as a visionary or they are well off the mark, when there will be knowing nods that it's time for you to go! Either way it makes no difference, so here are some personal reflections;

I believe we could complement the current exciting work on pathogenesis with more work on prevention. In fact the UKCRC came to a similar conclusion in 2006 when it analyzed the pattern of research activity in the UK. Work in the Centre and elsewhere exploring how immunological tolerance can be encouraged through early introduction of solid foods; prevention of infections; vit D supplementation; etc have a lot to teach us; and the results could have far reaching public health consequences.

How close are we to personalised treatment for asthma, for example based on our increasing knowledge of biomarkers and the interactions between genes and the environment. How do we implement?

How do we engage with some of the emerging science and technologies such as the stem cell revolution or nanotechnology so that we use them to benefit patients with respiratory diseases including asthma?

We must take advantage of the thrust nationally, even globally, to promote translational 'bench to bedside' research. For the asthma scientist, the gathering momentum to promote translational medicine is perfect because we have always been engaged in this type of research to a greater or lesser extent. The big difference is that now it has an official name, government support and most importantly facilities and greater resources. We should publicize widely our credentials and claim our deserved share of these resources.

Earlier consultations on asthma research priorities commissioned by Asthma UK recommended that we could be testing hypotheses more and not simply generating them. There is no better time to do so than now. You will find willing partners in the pharmaceutical industry and strong alliances could be established in an open collaboration where there is sharing of non-competitive discoveries.

My view has always been and remains stronger than ever that a tightly integrated multi-disciplinary group of exceptional basic and clinical scientists would make faster progress towards developing new therapies for asthma compared to small groups working in isolation. This was why we created our MRC and Asthma UK Centre.

This is how it happened. Barry Kay and I were at a CIA meeting in Bermuda when over a couple of drinks at the bar (where the best plots are often hatched) we first discussed the possibility of joining up our research groups. That was the start of a conversation which captured our imagination and gained momentum as the weeks went by.

Professor Catto at King's and Professor Borysiewicz at Imperial from day 1 strongly encouraged a cross London initiative in asthma. Their support was unwavering during the pre-nuptial negotiations. Without their help and that of Gwyn W and then Robert Lechler at KCL and Steve Smith and Malcolm Green at IC, none of this would have been possible so I want to take this opportunity to thank them, the MRC, Asthma UK and the institutions publicly for their support, their generous investments and for their confidence in us.

We were approved as a MRC Centre in 2005 after a nation-wide competition. With Tim Williams, we established a synergistic platform to create opportunities for collaborations. Our strategy was refined by an excellent international advisory board, chaired by Paul O'Byrne.

The rest is history and the metrics speak for themselves. In the first 5 years the numbers of PIs have doubled with other exceptional colleagues knocking on the door to join. Centre members have produced a prolific stream of high impact papers and played a very active role in public engagement. As predicted the Centre has provided a very robust and successful platform to leverage resources for asthma research – more than doubling the average annual research income per PI in the first 5 years in the face of tightening of resources nationally. Compared to 2005 when only 8% of grants submitted were of a collaborative nature, towards end of the first 5 years 58% of grants were between two or more PIs in the Centre!

The Centre has become a magnet for aspiring high flyers in asthma research and it has built capacity. The Centre now has 75 associated junior faculty, fellowships and SpRs that did not previously exist; and the numbers of PhD students have risen almost 4-fold from 34 to 131 in the first 5 year period – all working on asthma; of our 4 year studentships more than 85% receive a merit or distinction in their first year MSc's.

One can always structure strategy to ensure that the science is of high quality, but one cannot manufacture the bond of trust and friendship between PIs. That is really what the Centre celebrates.

The MRC, Asthma UK and the partner institutions provided the cement in the first 5 years allowing the Centre to build its foundation. The Centre could not have made such rapid progress without their support but the job is not done yet. I am therefore delighted that MRC approved another 5 years of funding for the Centre in the face of stiff competition. Asthma UK will continue to support the Chair at Imperial.

Of course I did not achieve these things by myself and I pay an enormous tribute to my colleagues, mentors, students and patients for their encouragement and support. I was fortunate to have been trained by some outstanding physicians and scientists and some are here today, so I had no lack of role models. They include some of the Who's Who of allergy and resp med: Dame Margaret Turner-Warwick, Tim Clark, Barry Kay, Frank Austen, and Jeff Drazen. There are many more people with whom I have shared my journey, too many to name but you know who you are.

I am also glad that many of my family and some close friends can join us today to share in this event. I hope you will have a chance to meet them later.

There is never a perfect time to leave and there is unfinished business, but in research, education and healthcare, our work is never finished. My departure will allow the Centre to spring clean and refresh. I am delighted that Seb has taken over as Director and I know the Centre is in very good hands.

So what is the future for me?

Well, as soon as we can, my mother and I will finish writing the first recipe book on Chinese cooking for patients with food allergies! It will be bilingual - my mum will take advanced orders today!

Then after a few months break and health permitting, I have accepted an invitation to start up the first allergy service in Hong Kong in one of the hospitals. HK is a portal to China and SE Asia, so I am excited to see what will happen.

I therefore leave to start a new chapter but I go with many happy memories and am proud to be part of your history.

I wish you every success and God bless!