

NANCY E. SIMPSON

John Laurence Hamerton
1929-2006



The Canadian human/medical genetics community lost one of its great leaders in the field when John Laurence Hamerton sadly died on February 9, 2006. Although not born in Canada, he became an important figure in the development of human/medical genetics in the country. He was born in Hove, England in September 1929. He graduated from the Imperial College of the University of London with a BSc in Zoology in 1948. During his early career at the University of London and Guy's Hospital, he earned a DSc for work on bone marrow transplantation, and cytogenetics.

John Hamerton was already a well-known name among the international community of human cytogeneticists when he arrived in Canada to join the Department of Paediatrics at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg in 1969. His research on human chromosomal abnormalities continued and he soon became interested in human gene mapping. At the international human gene mapping meetings, John was a prominent figure and in 1977 he hosted the 4 International Workshop on Human Gene Mapping in Winnipeg.

The effect of public policy on research funding and delivery of genetic services was of interest to him and he spearheaded survey studies of developments in medical genetics related to the delivery of health services. In the early seventies he led the Canadian study of the safety and efficacy of amniocenteses for the pre-natal diagnosis of genetic diseases. It was a pleasure for me to work closely with him as director of the registry of the amniocentesis study. Later on he chaired another nationwide survey, the Canadian Randomized Trial of Chorionic Villi sampling.

He was one of the early members of the Canadian College of Medical Geneticists and their president in 1991, when he was instrumental in establishing medical genetics as an independent medical and scientific specialty of the Canadian Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons. Both the American Society of Human Genetics and the Genetics Society of Canada elected him as their president.

John was a Distinguished Professor Emeritus at the University of Manitoba when he died. His many honours and awards included a fellowship in the Royal Society of Canada (1997) and an honorary fellowship in the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada. In 2003, he was made an Officer of the Order of Canada. Those in the genetic community who knew John were not surprised to learn that on retirement he moved to the country, took up sheep farming and soon became the President of the Manitoba Sheep Association and Chair of the Canada Sheep Council.

His family and friends, the genetic and medical communities and Canada have lost a distinguished academic.

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(Author's title given as of the time of writing)