

John Robey Cobbett 1930 -2016 BA MB BChir (Cantab) FRCS

John Cobbett qualified in medicine (Cambridge and the London Hospital) in 1956. Having decided, initially, on a career in General Practice, his “seduction” into Plastic and Reconstructive surgery resulted from a spell as House Surgeon at the Queen Victoria Hospital, East Grinstead where he came to the attention of Sir Archibald McIndoe.

McIndoe demanded competence in General Surgery of all candidates for training in his adopted specialty, a course that Cobbett embarked upon, returning in 1963 to East Grinstead as a Senior Registrar. Despite the onerous clinical duties that this post included (Plastic Surgery trainees were expected to cover for all surgical emergencies admitted to the Casualty department; then a comprehensive local service) and, in addition, embellish their CV’s with items of research. John decided to tackle the possibility (at the time, in some eyes, the impossibility) of micro-vascular anastomosis and was granted space in the Blond/McIndoe laboratory where, with the aid of a bench binocular microscope and instruments, many of which were sourced from the jewellery trade, he perfected re-anastomosis of aortae in 250 gram rats. This was followed by successful renal transplantation in the same animals providing a cohort of those, genetically labelled, to contribute to the work of establishing the relevance of HLA tissue typing.

In 1966, Cobbett was awarded the Moynihan Travelling Fellowship by the Association of Surgeons of Great Britain and Ireland.

In 1968, John Cobbett was appointed Consultant in Plastic Surgery to the Queen Victoria and Lewisham hospitals. That year he performed a single stage transfer of a great toe to replace an amputated thumb using micro-vascular anastomosis; the first such procedure to be undertaken successfully in western practice, probably the first worldwide. This was reported in The British Journal of Bone and Joint Surgery in 1969. His courage had propelled surgical aspiration into clinical reality; it had laid a solid foundation for future application.

In 1976 he was appointed the Simpson Smith Memorial Lecturer at the West London Hospital and in 1977 gave the Gordon Watson Lecture at the Royal College of Surgeons of England.

From 1973 to 1975 he was elected a member of the Council of the British Association of Plastic Surgeons and served as Hon. Secretary of that body during 1975-77.

During the year 1975-76, he was President of the Section of Plastic Surgery of the Royal Society of Medicine.

In 2010, John Cobbett was elected “Pioneer of Hand Surgery” by the International Federation of Societies for the Surgery of the Hand, their highest accolade.

He is survived by two sons, a daughter, grandchildren and great grandchildren by whom he will be greatly missed as he will be by his surviving colleagues and particularly by those whom he inspired to continue his innovative work.