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The Most Influential Scientists in the Development of Medical Informatics (26): Barry Barber (1933-2019)

Barry Barber (1933-2019) was born in Hove, England, and educated at the Friends (Quaker) School Saffron Walden and Christ's College Cambridge (1-3). He studied Mathematics and Physics taking the theoretical option. He was then appointed to Medical Physics Department of The (now Royal) London Hospital and during the next 11 ½ years he learned the professional activities of a medical physicist under the tutelage of Dr. Lloyd Kemp.

He specialized in precision radiation dosimetry in the course of which he earned his Ph.D. from the University of London. He started exploring the opportunities for using some of the Operational Research techniques developed during WWII to improve the organization of the hospital. He collaborated with William (Bud) Abbott from the Finance Department to make the case for the hospital's purchase of an Elliott 803 computer in 1964 to enable the hospital's finance systems to progress as well as to provide a tool for scientific and medical research.

He became the Director of the Operational Research Unit in 1966 and remained at the hospital until the NHS re-organization of 1974 took him to the North East Thames Regional Health Authority as Chief Management Scientist. Meanwhile, he looked after the scientific and medical research activities that could be developed, mainly on a “do it yourself” basis. The computer had an immediate access store of 8k of 59-bit words with a backing store of 35mm magnetic film and a 256 µsec cycle time. Unknown to us at the time the fast 5-hole paper tape readers and printers must have been based on the technologies developed at Bletchley Park. Three years of exploration of the opportunities provided by the computer was enough for us to outline ideas for the award and department-based Patient Administration for the hospital. This fitted in with the Department of Health’s of “Experimental Real-Time Computer Program” and led to the implementation of the first Patient Administration System in the UK at The London Hospital using a fast Univac, 418/III, message switching system installed in March 1971. The system was developed in modules by hospital staff overseen and directed by a Computer Executive including a Professor of Medicine, Robert Cohen, a senior nurse, Maureen Scholes, and a senior Administrator, Michael Fairey, and subsequently David Kenny. Interestingly, the software was run on three different computer platforms and finally de-commissioned after an amazing 36 years.

During this time Barry Barber was closely involved with the Institute of Physics, the Operational Research Society, and the British Computer...
Barry Barber was one of the founders of the European Federation for Medical Informatics (EFMI). Through its work, EFMI provides leadership and expertise to the multidisciplinary, health-focused community and policymakers, enables the transformation of healthcare in accord with the world-wide vision of improving the health of the world population.

In Copenhagen, on September 10-11 in 1976, representative of 10 countries: Barry Barber (UK), Antonio Perens de Talens (Italy), Francois Gremy (France), Rolf Hansen (Norway), Mogens Jorgensen (Denmark), Hans Peterson (Sweden), Peter Leo Reichhertz (FR Germany), Jan Roukens (Holland), Jan van Egmond (Belgium) and Ilkka Vaananen (Finland) adopted Statute of new Medical informatics association–EFMI–European Federation for Medical Informatics. Preliminary Executive officers were: Antoine Remond (France), as a chairman, Barry Barber (UK), as secretary and Peter Leo Reichhertz (FR Germany), as treasurer. The EFMI founding societies were from Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, United Kingdom. In a rather short time, EFMI succeeded to launch its first big meeting – MIE 1978 in Cambridge, organized by the Medical Specialist Group of the British Computer Society. At that moment EFMI consisted of 12 constituent societies.

REFERENCES