

Rodney Harris



Personal Details

Name	Rodney Harris
Dates	27/05/1932
Place of Birth	UK (Liverpool)
Main work places	Manchester
Principal field of work	Clinical Genetics
Short biography	To follow

Interview

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Interview with Professor Rodney Harris, Tuesday 7th March 2006.

PSH. It's Tuesday 7 March 2006 and I'm talking with Professor Rodney Harris at his home in Knutsford, Cheshire. Rodney, in most of my talks I have just started at the beginning. So when were you born and where?

RH. I was born on 27 May 1932 in Liverpool.

PSH. And did you go to school in Liverpool?

RH. I went to school in Donald Road, which was very famous at the time because a great ape escaped and climbed over the roofs and we all had to be evacuated. Shortly after that another rather nastier ape started trouble in Europe, we all had to have gas masks, be herded into doorways because of the planning of bombing. A bit later on I was bombed in Liverpool. Were you bombed?

PSH. No. Well, yes and no. At home in Devon we weren't, but I was actually in hospital in London, but that was during the flying bombs.

RH. Oh I see. I was bombed in 1940 in our little house. My father, who joined the Air Force shortly afterwards, said it was too dangerous. We had to be evacuated so we were evacuated first of all to Queensferry and the night we arrived, a stray German raider dumped its load on Queensferry and blew the roof off our house. And my greatest hobby at that time was collecting shrapnel. I used to love collecting shrapnel; a friend of mine who was more ambitious, he used to go on the firing ranges and collect armament and he blew his ear and thumb off doing that. He found a beautiful piece. I remember it, a beautiful piece of metal about 3 centimetres across, half a centimetre deep and it looked hollow, so he naturally got a nail and hit it. It was a detonator. So one's youth was quite exciting. The war did a lot for me.

PSH. What did your parents do, Rodney? Were they in any way medical or scientific?

RH. Not at all. My mother was, I won't say 'just a housewife' but she was mainly a housewife and she was responsible absolutely for me getting an education at all, because we lived in Wales in a remote village which you probably know, Penmaenmawr. I went to the local school and she got me into a grammar school when it was fee-paying, and then about 6 months later the fees were abolished, so it was a very good start. My Dad was a very, very talented jeweller and he used to make jewellery. He created the most wonderful artefacts. He specialised for a time on coronets for the nobility. Then he went into the air force and the Germans found him somehow. I don't know how they did it and blew him off his aeroplane. He was alright though, but he gave up the Air Force and he gave up jewellery then and he went to work in the Civil Service, Income Tax, until mother sold her engagement ring and bought him a new set of tools and he set up in business

as a jeweller again. He did a wonderful job. He was replaced by his then apprentice, David Robinson, who has a number of shops now in all of the North West and in London and is a multi-millionaire or something. Hell of a nice guy, and I might have been him.

PSH. You mean you might have been a multi-millionaire?

RH. Well, I don't know about that. One couldn't be that logical, but certainly I could have taken over my father's business, but it wouldn't have been so successful.

PSH. What made you get interested in medicine?

RH. In medicine?

PSH. Or science or medicine or anything along that line.

RH. I was very, very fortunate in the teachers I had at school, a botany mistress and a biology master who were inspirational. A chap called "Daddy" Bryant, who was at the school I went to. He was wonderful. You know in the lower 6th we were doing all sorts of experiments which presumably would not be allowed now.

PSH. I'm sure.

RH. Because they are living creatures. I remember my first experiment was counting the number of heartbeats of a silkworm. Some sort of invertebrate and as the temperature went up, the heartbeat went up. Hardly earth shattering stuff but it was wonderful to be doing something as analytical and carefully thought out as it was. Wonderful man, he died recently. Daddy Bryant.

PSH. It makes a big difference.

RH. Of course it does, but how did I get involved in genetics? We are getting to that or am I jumping the gun?

PSH. Well let's stick with medicine for a moment. Did you go to Liverpool medical school?

RH. Eventually yes.

PSH. Where did you go first?

RH. Liverpool Dental School.

PSH. And was that because you wanted to do dentistry, or because . . .

RH. My parents were very keen they should have a son in a profession. My son the doctor was what they had in mind. But I was, you won't believe this

Peter, I was terribly diffident and I couldn't imagine myself being anything so distinguished as being a doctor. I thought being a dentist might be safer, so I went to the dental school and I did two years for the BDS and hated it. Dental mechanics was the worst word in . . . It was awful. So I went to see the then Dean of the Faculty of Medicine, Jack Leggett, and he said I could move from dentistry to medicine providing I got a first class Honours Degree in an intercalated BSc. I hadn't even thought of doing that at that point. So I did that. I went into anatomy with a chap called Jeffrey Harrison, you may know him from Oxford.

PSH. Anthropologist?

RH. Yes

PSH. Yes.

RH. He was teaching then as a lecturer I think and he got me interested in genetics. He taught genetics and really went on from there. I got into medicine, I did the BSc, which was on the effect of low temperature on the guinea pig testis and the most exciting thing I did in that period of my life was going down to Liverpool docks to collect a whale's testicle. Nobody told me a whale's testicle came in a barrel. I only had a motorbike with me at the time.

PSH. You had to get it back in a wheelbarrow did you or something?

RH. Yes.

PSH. So did you have to go back to the beginning for medicine?

RH. The first three years are the same.

PSH. That was very lucky actually.

RH. It was very lucky.

PSH. Now when you were in Liverpool then, Henry Cohen must have been there.

RH. I was his last registrar.

PSH. And he was professor while you were a student too?

RH. Oh yes, yes. He was, yes.

PSH. Having had two years in Liverpool myself, I found Liverpool Medical School a very strange place. What was your experience of it as more of a local?

RH. At that time I had nothing to compare it with but I do remember some of the very extraordinary teachers. Remember Baker Bates?

PSH. I remember him very well.

RH. Well I was his houseman. Strange. Very lovable and people like Gerard Sanderson.

PSH. Don't remember him.

RH. He's died not that long ago. He was an iconoclast, a medical iconoclast. He didn't believe in anything and the story I remember most clearly about him, was being on a ward round with him and there was a bit of tumult at the ward entrance and a woman came rushing in and in front of all the students, and all the nurses and all the patients, she threw herself to her knees and grabbed him around his legs and said please Dr Sanderson, treat my husband, treat my husband. And then the story was that he was a thief, an inveterate thief and he had lost a leg. Had hypertension, severe hypertension and he had lost a leg as a consequence, and being a thief and having only one leg is a disadvantage to getting caught, and Sandy was a very odd character. He said, like the people that won't treat, won't give heart transplants to people who smoke, he wouldn't go on treating this guy because he was a thief, and got caught, so he died. Not in the ward, but there we are.

PSH. Oh dear. Did you meet Cyril Clarke when you were a student?

RH. Yes.

PSH. Was that at the Northern?

RH. No. I was never as a student at the Northern. I was always at the Southern and Broad Green and Liverpool Royal Infirmary, so I never actually had Cyril in that way. It was only after I went to the Royal Infirmary. That's when I really got to know him well, and I became his registrar and senior registrar and lecturer.

PSH. And had you any idea then, that you were wanting to do something related to Genetics?

RH. Well, having Johnny Woodrow and Ronnie Finn and who was the Irish one?

PSH. Oh, Richard McConnell.

RH. Richard McConnell. Hell of a nice guy and Cyril, it was difficult not to think there was something in it. And then David Weatherall was working on, obviously thalassaemia even then. He was inspirational. Yes, so that's what got me started.

PSH. What year was it you were registrar then with Cyril, roughly anyway?

RH. Well it must have been the end of the fifties. Can't remember the exact year now.

PSH. Not to worry, but did you get into doing any genetics at that stage, or did that come later? For instance, the HLA I was thinking of.

RH. I got into HLA because everybody was prowling round rhesus. Too many people were doing rhesus, so Cyril said I want you to do white cell antigens. There's a plane going on Monday to Leiden. Hop on it and go and work with Jan Van Rood for a bit. So I learnt a little bit about it there. So when I came back . . .

PSH. How long were you there then?

RH. Oh not very long, a month or two at most. Paris I did, I went to Paris. I'm trying to remember the link. Can't remember what. I mean it was through Van Rood and my interest in HLA, Cyril's interest in HLA, pushing me into it. He had got me to go to Paris to work with Jean Dausset. And that's really when I got stuck into that. I worked with a guy from California, from Los Angeles called Walford. He was a wonderful character. Very nice guy to be with, but he was absolutely eccentric. Everywhere he went he wore Navaho Indian uniform, although he was not a Navaho Indian, and in days when people didn't shave their heads, his head was like a billiard ball and we had a great time in Paris. I mean I remember with him, going to this nightclub and rattling a little . . . hatch opened and a face looked out "Yes? Ah I see, Monsieur Walford, you have the actor Los Angeles. Ah oui." He can come in but you can't because you are not dressed properly. And I remember I had a sailing jacket on and a sweater because he told me dress down. I always went round with a tie in those days. It was very good. He offered me a job in Los Angeles. Didn't take it.

PSH. Did you have a specific project when you were in Paris or were you just learning the techniques?

RH. I was learning the technique mainly.

PSH. And was this on secondment from Liverpool or did you have to so to speak finish your Liverpool post and . . .

RH. Not really. Yes I had to finish the Liverpool post at that time, but got a Darwin Research Fellowship of the Eugenics Society and they paid for me. Well I went to Africa on that too didn't I? Went to South West Africa.

PSH. Was that before or after Paris?

RH. It was after Paris. I ought to have kept notes of this. After Paris. That was interesting too because I went with Jeffrey Harrison and Joe Singer, you remember Singer?

PSH. Which Singer?

RH. Oh one of them. There's more than one. Obviously, there's a whole family of Singers, but this guy was the Professor of something or other in Cape Town, Joe Singer.

PSH. I don't think I've encountered him.

RH. He was one of these great anthropological guys and we studied the skin colour of the yellow bushmen in the Kalahari, and I remember we only ever found one bushman. They were very elusive, mainly because until that time they were being hunted like vermin. Absolutely appalling. We did actually encounter a few of them. We went to a Bantu village on the Okavango River and they had a few bushmen as slaves. They were only slaves during the season, half a season. That's the time they went walkabout. They were great days Peter. Did you ever do this?

PSH. A bit, yes. Was there any tie-in, Rodney, with the HLA work at all?

RH. Not with that, no.

PSH. You weren't studying HLA as an anthropological marker?

RH. Not on that one, no.

PSH. So after your Liverpool registrar post and your Darwin Fellowship, what happened after that? Was Liverpool still your base?

RH. Yes. I came back from Africa and I wanted to go on doing research but David Price Evans said you have to get membership before you can go on with your research. So I did membership, I was still in Liverpool and then went back to being an SHO at Broad Green. Sorry I'm out of step. Went as an SHO at Broad Green with Baker Bates et al and then came back to being a Registrar at the Southern and then Senior Registrar at the Northern. And then Lecturer and Senior Registrar with Cyril.

PSH. Because from my recollection there was always just this one lectureship in medicine at the Royal.

RH. That must have been me at one stage.

PSH. Yes, and I think at one stage, David Weatherall and other illustrious folk

RH. Oh I didn't know. Gosh that makes me feel good. Sorry I'm disorganised Peter. I've always regretted one thing above all, but I have regretted one thing, that I have not kept a diary.

PSH. I never have either. There's never been time, Rodney.

RH. Half an hour a day that's all it takes.

PSH. In theory yes. In theory. But anyway you became lecturer. Did you have a sort of remit then? Was this to get the HLA work going in Liverpool?

RH. Must have been, because I was invited to go to Manchester because of the HLA work.

PSH. Was the new Nuffield Institute going then?

RH. Yes.

PSH. So did you have a lab?

RH. I shared a lab, with Johnny Woodrow I think. Yes. David didn't have a lab. In those days it wasn't that big. I never forget, much later on, David came to Manchester when I was reader there and he would have been quite interested to stay in Manchester because of Martin Israels and people like that and they wouldn't find him a lab. They wouldn't find him any resources at all.

PSH. So what year was it you moved across from Liverpool to Manchester? Was this after Alan Emery had left Manchester?

RH. Yes, I took his job, that's right, '68.

PSH. This then was a Senior Lectureship I suppose, or something like that?

RH. It was a Readership.

PSH. Who then was in Manchester that was relevant from your point of view when you went there?

RH. Nobody really. I don't think there was anybody. There was a lab, Willink lab. There was a little bit of genetics going on there but there was nothing.

PSH. Would Komrower have been there?

RH. Komrower was there, yes.

PSH. And what about Douglas Black? Was he in Manchester?

RH. Oh yes, he was my boss. He invited me to go there. Douglas was a great guy. One problem though, he always shouted at me. I was the only person in Manchester he shouted at.

PSH. Why?

RH. He tried to make me hear! I couldn't hear even then, Peter.

PSH. Oh I see.

RH. I got membership, deaf you know.

PSH. Really?

RH. Oh yes.

PSH. Because I was going to say I couldn't imagine Douglas shouting at anybody because they had done something wrong.

RH. Precisely. Oh he wouldn't shout. If you did something wrong he wouldn't shout. Gosh no. You see he was very quiet voiced. That was the most infuriating thing about him because he would regularly chair meetings and everybody would be talking and then suddenly everything would all go quiet and Douglas would go [makes noise] and there would be absolute uproar, laughter, roaring. He was the funniest man alive and I never knew what he was saying.

PSH. When you got to Manchester, did you take the HLA with you, and what stage had it got to there? Had it got to what you might call the transplantation stage?

RH. Oh yes. My reason for going to. I was doing HLA transplantation in Liverpool too, because I was invited to go to Manchester to set up a tissue typing lab for their new transplantation facility.

PSH. And when you set that up, who did you have with you to help?

RH. One technician I brought with me, the name will come back.

PSH. And were you expected also to kind of run a complete genetics service and set- up?

RH. Didn't exist. There wasn't a genetic service. There was one counselling clinic a week and there was one guy who pottered in a chromosome lab. There was a chromosome lab also at Pendlebury, but there was no service.

PSH. It's always been amazing to me that how when you went there, there was almost nothing and you built it up.

RH. That's true.

PSH. Very completely. So what was the sequence? How did it go, gradually?

RH. Well I did this one clinic; I'll tell you, you won't believe this, but the night before the first Monday I went to do a clinic, a genetic clinic, I thought I had better read this up. Like do-it-yourself healthcare. Can you reckon?

That was the primitive notion of genetics in those days. And how did I do it? I think the most important thing that helped it forward, was having health visitors, who became as it were, prototypic genetic counsellors. They were very very good. Two good girls I had then, they really looked at it from the patient's point of view and made sure I did that too. And then I got Lauren Kerzin-Storarr and I remember going up to Scotland to a meeting and meeting her there and being very impressed because this was a genetic counsellor, a bona-fide card-carrying genetic counsellor. She joined me in Manchester for half a week, that is all we could pay her. And then it became so clear that was the way to run things, that I had to get her a proper salary scale, which didn't exist. She wasn't a nurse and she wasn't a scientist in that sense. I remember I had to negotiate for about six months or a year with the Secretary of State to get a recognised post, which became Genetic Counsellor.

PSH. Roughly, when was that do you think?

RH. Well, I arrived in Manchester in '68. I suppose it must be half way through '69, no no no, much earlier, the beginning of '69.

PSH. So she came as early as that?

RH. Oh yes.

PSH. I didn't know that. And who were the other, what were the other, what you might call elements that you brought in? What about on the clinical side.

RH. On the clinical side I had these genetic associates or health visitors. And then Dian Donnai came. She was a GP and she came to be a research assistant of some sort, but she was very good clinically. Very good indeed. In those days you could do things like this. I went to see the chairman of the Hospital Board and explained that this was very important. We were just beginning something new and could she be given a permanent post, so this went on and on and on. Eventually they made her a Senior Registrar then I got JCHMT, J Pac?

PSH. What ever it was then.

RH. Whatever it was. I got approval then and so she became bona-fide, although they weren't registered or anything in those days, and then a few years went by and I managed to get her a consultant job. I don't know how I did that. I honestly don't know. The thing is, things were flexible. You could think of new things and if you shouted loud enough, not shouted loud enough, but kept on about it loud enough, you know you've done it yourself Peter.

PSH. One of the things, not just I, but others have always reckoned on you being very expert at, was getting the channels in the NHS to work. Was there any special technique or any special factors that you think allowed you to be successful, or was it just persistence?

RH. Persistence was important. But it sounds funny to say this now, I regarded administrators, before they were managers, as human and worthy of being talked to, and chatted with, and asked their opinion. I remember I used to go to the Department of Health rather a lot, before I was Consultant Adviser, and do you know I got an invitation to go to somebody's retirement, a chap called Evan Bouchier. Don't suppose you have heard of him?

PSH. No I don't think I have.

RH. I remember his name but for the hell of me I can't remember where he was. He was Chief Executive in Bolton when he retired and it was people like that, that I developed an affinity for, long before they were called managers.

PSH. One of the things you developed quite early in Manchester was the registers. How did they start?

RH. That was Emery, Alan Emery.

PSH. I see.

RH. He didn't start the registers. The word register came from him. He had a rather different idea, I don't know, a different idea. Mine was a typical medical approach. I wanted to get everything labelled and then we could do something for them. That's how I did it.

PSH. But it was very effective.

RH. Yes it was.

PSH. Whereas Alan's never really quite worked.

RH. He's always been artistic. A great artistic man you know.

PSH. I know.

RH. A great eye.

PSH. Yes. Yes. But thinking in terms of the different components in Manchester and the things that were special about Manchester, the registers have always been one of the strong points.

RH. Absolutely and Lauren Kerzin-Storarr came down to help me with that. I remember now, that's the main reason why she came down.

PSH. Now the other thing which I always feel has been a lasting achievement is your concept of different services 'under one roof'. Was this something you aimed consciously at or was it something that just happened?

RH. Well if you just cast your mind back to those days, those in some ways, dark days, the cytogeneticists were becoming independent and some of them were quite hostile.

PSH. They were indeed.

RH. They did not want medics overlording it, and by that time I was on the College of Physicians. I could only see one way that genetics could work properly, and that was by everybody co-operating. And I used to use the word team a lot in those days and that's really what did it. I wanted the cytogenetics labs to be tied in with the clinical genetics service, but I never said, never argued, didn't want responsibility for running them, but I did want them under one roof. That worked quite well, that phrase, 'under one roof'. Except some people said, very sadly, but we are in two separate buildings, does that matter? That was good. And then the other thing of course was molecular.

PSH. I was going to ask that. How did you first come in contact with Bob Williamson first of all?

RH. That was 1985 was it or '84. About that time. I could see, the way we could all see, that there was something in this DNA stuff. It wasn't just chemistry. It was going to be important. So I thought I had better go and learn a bit about it. So I can't remember how I first came into contact with him and I went to work in his lab for 3 months.

PSH. I remember, and you worked on Waardenburg, is that right?

RH. Yes. I did. I did. Who mapped it? Oh Andrew, Andrew Read.

PSH. But you, if I remember, you studied it at Mary's and brought it back to Manchester.

RH. I did. I did. Absolutely. Gosh I had forgotten it. You remember my life better than I do! And then I could see when I got back, there were other things popping up, 21 hydroxylase deficiency, and it was perfectly clear that this was an important part of medicine, and by that time fortunately I was Consultant Adviser, so at every advisory meeting I used to politely but firmly argue the case for there being DNA labs in medicine.

PSH. Now that's a really important contribution, because until that Department of Health three-centre pilot study there was really nothing, was there, except perhaps in Scotland.

RH. I can't remember that.

PSH. But I mean, were you involved in getting the DOH to support this pilot project?

RH. I would like to think so, but these things are always so multifactorial aren't they? I mean I do know that I went and, figuratively, banged the table at regular intervals and I wrote endless papers, and I had one or two very good colleagues there. Do you remember Cheese?

PSH. Ian Lister Cheese?

RH. Ian Lister Cheese. He was so good.

PSH. He's somebody I want to go and see.

RH. Oh yes. He's a nice man. Very humble sort of chap.

PSH. But very very helpful.

RH. He was tremendously helpful yes. I mean I wrote these papers saying how important it was, and how it would be, I even I think, suggested, it might become cost effective, which was early in those days to be saying things like that. I'm sure that's what got them started. It was called a special medical development and I can remember the point at which it became a reality, or a nascent reality, was at a North West Regional Health Authority day. Can't remember what you used to call them now, when a Minister came down. He made some remark about Genetics in Manchester and gave me an opportunity to ask in public whether the Department of Health believed they would be able to fund the special medical developments in molecular biology. I can't even remember which minister it was.

PSH. I don't think it matters at all which Minister it was.

RH. Well anyway, that's what did it.

PSH. They come and go.

RH. They come and go. And their husbands often push them out!

PSH. What year was it roughly you became adviser to the DOH? Any idea?

RH. Well I was after Cedric. Cedric [Carter] was the first one and I was the second one. So I guess it was when he died.

PSH. He probably passed it over when he retired I think.

RH. Oh maybe that was it.

PSH. Because he, I seem to remember, was very insistent on giving everything up when he retired, because that's when I got involved with Journal of Medical Genetics as Assistant Editor.

RH. Oh I remember that. Remember we had lunch together, a few of us?

PSH. I do. What did it mean being advisor to the DOH?

RH. Everything and nothing.

PSH. OK, what about the everything.

RH. Everything was, I could go on bashing away at genetics. We had people there who were the most senior GPs in the College of GPs, very erudite physicians and all the surgeons, everybody. The absolute top brass of medicine were there, and me pushing genetics, nobody had ever heard of before.

PSH. So did it give you an open door to sort of give your views?

RH. At least to make the point. Yes it did, no question about that. And Lister Cheese was somewhere, was he a secretary or something? I don't know. He was there and he gave me opportunities.

PSH. That's really important because I think without somebody like yourself doing that, people could have gone on knocking at the wrong door forever.

RH. I think so.

PSH. How long were you their advisor?

RH. Too long. I was longer than anybody else. There haven't been that many. There were three Chief Medical Officers and I overlapped the first and the last and had the whole of the middle one, so I think it must have been about five or six years.

PSH. Which, if you had to name one achievement while you were DOH adviser, which would you think of?

RH. DNA.

PSH. I'm sure you are right.

RH. DNA and also I think the Department of Health began to take medical genetics seriously as a specialty. Cedric, bless him, had got recognition for consultant status but really there were so few of them and it was possible to go along and say there ought to be more, and of course, with the College of Physicians I was always pushing that.

PSH. That's what I was going to ask next was, you set up the College Committee didn't you?

RH. No I didn't.

PSH. Or rather you were its first Chairman?

RH. No I wasn't.

PSH. Oh. Well who was?

RH. Cedric.

PSH. Do you know, I never knew that?

RH. Well actually I can't swear to that. But it was he that put me up for it. He was obviously influential in the college and it was he who put me up for it.

PSH. Yes. So, again, was that before you became, or it must have been around perhaps the same time as you became DOH Adviser?

RH. Yes about the same sort of time.

PSH. Thinking about the College I mean, again that's a strange organisation isn't it, but a very nice one in some ways.

RH. I never found it strange.

PSH. Well no, what I was meaning was, I don't think it was strange, but it sometimes worked in rather strange ways.

RH. Yes it does. And it was definitely very, what's the word? Not bureaucratic, that's not the word I want. There are a few eminent men and they rather controlled things. You know, things went the way they wanted, not necessarily the way everybody else thought it ought to go.

PSH. Were you thinking of David Pyke?

RH. Oh how surprising you should mention that name! He was good. But I remember a famous conversation I had with David Pyke. I did that first study on Education, teaching genetics to medical students and it was at the point of being, it was on paper anyway, and I said, "Should we not publish this David?" as a college publication. No no no. So I said 'come on'. He said it will cost money. I said the College is a rich organisation. He said "Oh alright then."

PSH. That was really important, because that series of reports was what really helped put clinical genetics on the map, not just in Britain but right across Europe.

RH. Well, CAGSE took it forward. I agree, those reports from the college, they were quite good actually.

PSH. They were very good.

RH. I mean the confidential enquiry. .

PSH. I was going to come onto that in a minute. But sticking with those reports.

RH. I feel very embarrassed talking to you like this, because you have been a real medical scientist. You have done great things in research Peter. You've made certain genetic disorders your own, and you have done more for them and about them than anybody else in the world. All I have done is plod away in a bureaucratic corner.

PSH. Nonsense Rodney! If you look into it, it is almost always somebody else who does things. We have both done a bit, and what interests me especially is how you helped the field to develop, because I do think one of the important things about medical genetics probably was that we didn't just help our own set-up. We had this tradition of helping everyone across the whole country and even wider.

RH. You mean other genetic centres?

PSH. Yes.

RH. Creating other genetic centres.

PSH. Yes and generally helping the field to advance.

RH. Yes, but you see I give Cedric a lot of credit for that, because the Clinical Genetics Society, as I remember, it was his creation.

PSH. I think it was.

RH. That's really the core.

PSH. But I didn't know about Cedric and the College of Physicians. Did you have any direct contact with Cedric when you took it over? Were there any things he, either had advised you or . . .

RH. I don't think so.

PSH. Because not being able to interview Cedric now, these are the kind of things I would have like to have asked him, because you followed on. Of your various achievements at the college, which would you put top of the list?

RH. Let me try and make a list of some sort. All the educational stuff, being pre-chairman of the SAC. You were the first chairman weren't you?

PSH. I think I was after Robin Winter.

RH. OK but I was never Chairman. I was Chairman of the Committee but it was always part of paediatrics and I argued for years that it should be separate and independent, so they made it separate and independent.

PSH. Yes and that was an important step.

RH. I thought it was important. That was one important thing. The next thing I did was looking at teaching genetics to medical students, which Hilary did with me if you remember?

PSH. I do indeed.

RH. I thought that was quite good, and what was quite pleasing was, when it was repeated three or four years ago, there was nothing really new in it. When I'm saying pleasing, what I mean is the framework was the same. There hadn't been that much progress, which is very sad you know. However, that worked. Then the confidential enquiry, which was partly Department of Health money.

PSH. Tell me a little bit about how that started.

RH. I was pushing the lawn mower in my last house and I was pushing it along thinking miserable thoughts, about would anybody ever recognise how important genetics really was. And I thought how did they recognise that surgery, the quality in surgery mattered – Confidential Enquiry. Why not do one in genetics. And that's how it happened. The analogy with surgery.

PSH. Remind me which were the main disorders you took on.

RH. Well they were Down's in older women . . .

PSH. Was it thalassaemia?

RH. Yes. Beta thalassaemia. I've done this for you.

PSH. Oh thank you.

RH. This was Leo ten Kate's what do they call it? Some daft name. Liber Amicorum.

PSH. Liber Amicorum, oh yes.

RH. Were you involved in that?

PSH. No. I have just been involved with Martinus Niermeijer's one, but not with Leo.

RH. The title of this was 'go forth and multiply', which took me ages to find out why on earth they used it. Nobody else seemed to know why they had used it. Anyway you asked me about Confidential Enquiry.

PSH. Well don't worry about the details, I was just thinking of the

RH. Down's, neural tube defects, multiple endocrine neoplasia Type 2A, cystic fibrosis and beta thalassaemia. It was about screening and prenatal diagnosis.

PSH. Neural tube defects makes me realise, I mean that was one of the big contributions you made in Manchester was in the multicentre, well not just the multicentre, the initial findings on neural tube defects and vitamins.

RH. Oh right. Leeds man. Smithells.

PSH. Smithells.

RH. Right. I hadn't got a lot to do with that you know Peter. I was peripherally involved. We were one of the collaborating centres.

PSH. Now the other thing I wanted to ask, really pretty well near the end Rodney, now. It was your study of genetic services across Europe. How did you get involved with that? Or, you didn't get involved, you started it.

RH. I do remember going to see that lovely Dutch woman,

PSH. I wonder who that would be.

RH. She may have died now.

PSH. You are not thinking of Margaretha Mikkelsen?

RH. Margaretha. Mikkelsen.

PSH. Yes she has.

RH. Is that right?

PSH. Just before I was able to interview her, sadly.

RH. Very sad. I visited her in her little flat near Copenhagen and we talked this over and she was enthusiastic about the idea. I was trying it out on her, whether we could do something in Europe that we tried to do in Britain. And it really took off from there. I got a number of people that would be co-operative, which wasn't terribly scientific. We went for people that would co-operate.

PSH. That's very wise. There's no point in having somebody who's brilliant scientifically, if they won't work together.

RH. Or is unhelpful.

PSH. Yes.

RH. So what was your question again?

PSH. Well it was really the main factors behind you getting it going.

RH. The main factors that made me think about doing it was, that we had done something like that in Britain, with the Genetic Centres in Britain, and the Europeans did seem to be lagging, with some notable exceptions, and could we not do anything and get the European Union to back genetic centres all over Europe. And that was really what it was, to try and get recognition in those countries that didn't yet have it, and get those countries that had inadequate resources, better funded.

PSH. And it's worked.

RH. I've lost track now. Has it worked?

PSH. Well I've lost track too, but it certainly helped the smaller countries with difficulties to get going.

RH. Yes.

PSH. Countries like Portugal.

PSH. Just to finish up, there are a couple of things I have been asking everybody and the first thing I have been asking everyone, is, is there one particular person that stands out as having been the major influence in your career in terms of either going into genetics or developing your interest?

RH. I think I must be case-hardened Peter. I can think of a lot of people who I recognised then and recognise now as being truly, momentous people. You will be embarrassed if I say you are top of the list. Well you are on the list anyway.

PSH. Thank you Rodney.

RH. Other people are, without a doubt, although not genetically, just as great, an example was Douglas Black. Douglas Black was a remarkable man. And Cyril in an odd sort of way. God knows, I have no idea what Cyril was really. But he did it and he stimulated people. And then of course there was Ronnie Finn, who died not long ago. I suppose they all had an influence, but I can't think of one single person to whom I attached my star.

PSH. Fair enough.

RH. Multifactorial.

PSH. The other thing I have been asking, is there one particular piece or area of work which you feel kind of, either proudest of, or which you identify with and feel, well this was your particular contribution?

RH. You mean a particular piece of scientific work?

PSH. No. Not necessarily.

RH. I think setting up the DNA lab in Manchester, getting people like Rob Elles and Tom Strachan and Andrew Read. Really first class people and they wouldn't have been in Manchester if it wasn't for me. Well I wasn't much good, they were really good.

PSH. That's a really important achievement because . . .

RH. I think it is.

PSH. And a lasting one too.

RH. Yes and I think having a well found genetics service in most genetic centres in Britain is an off shoot of that. Everything I say, I always mean as one part of a multifactorial whole. There's no doubt having those people in Manchester made a big difference.

PSH. Absolutely. Rodney, are there any things I have not asked about or brought up that you would like especially to mention.

RH. I will e-mail you if I think of them. I should really have done homework on this but I didn't.

PSH. I don't think doing homework helps all that much.

RH. Anyway there is that [gives document], which you may not find of any value whatsoever, but at least it is a sort of summary.

PSH. That's really helpful. Now I am just going to look at my notes to see if there's anything I've got down. I think that's all the main things. I am going to switch off the machine now. Thanks very much Rodney.

RH. It is a pleasure. It's a pleasure to see you Peter.

End of recording.