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Editor, RCoA 'Lives of the Fellows' Project

## The 'Lives of Fellows' Project: "Well, what an opportunity!"

This note is to introduce, for wider appreciation, the latest posting to the 'Lives of Fellows' section of the College's website, a short biography of Professor Sir Keith Sykes<sup>1</sup>, the leading British anaesthetist of his era, and one whose influence spread far wider.

As befitted an honorary member of the History of Anaesthesia Society he showed great interest in the project, and was a ready source of helpful details on his seniors and peers. When told that there was the opportunity to provide such information on himself his eyes twinkled, and his teasing query was "You mean you want me to write my *own* obituary?" This was followed by a thoughtful pause and a reaction which I am sure he had many times in his career: "Well, what an opportunity!" So what appears below was started by him, but was extended

by contributions from colleagues (Professor Pierre Foëx; Dr Jean Lumley) and, most importantly, from his family, an ideal support structure for the project editor, and an example I hope others will follow. Repeatedly, the hardest information to obtain is on the first two decades of life: parents and family, schooling, early career influences and young achievements. So follow this excellent example, recognise the opportunity, obtain the form (from [archives@rcoa.ac.uk](mailto:archives@rcoa.ac.uk)) and provide that key material at least – please!



**Professor Sir Malcolm Keith Sykes**  
MA MBBChir FFARCS  
FANZCA(Hon) FCASA(Hon) DA  
13/09/1925 to 17/11/2019  
Place of birth: Clevedon, Somerset  
Nationality: British  
Professor from 1970;  
Knight Bachelor from 1991

### General education

Plymouth College, 1930-4; Hele's School, Exeter, 1934-40; St John's School, Leatherhead, 1940; Heath Grammar School, Halifax, 1940-3; University College, London (Evacuated to University College, Bangor, North Wales), 1943-4; Magdalene College, Cambridge, 1944-6; University College Medical School, London, 1946-9.

After qualifying he was house physician, University College Hospital, London and house surgeon, Norfolk and Norwich Hospital, for six months each before spending two years in the RAMC with BAOR, the first year as a regimental MO, the second as the sole anaesthetist (after three weeks 'training' from his predecessor!) at British Military Hospital, Hamburg. He returned to UCH in 1952 for formal training, working as resident, SHO and registrar before spending 1954/5 as a fellow at Massachusetts General Hospital with a Rickmann Godlee Travelling Scholarship from UCH. He was senior registrar at UCH until appointed consultant at Hammersmith Hospital, London in 1958 with lecturer status in the Royal Postgraduate Medical School. Advanced successively to senior lecturer (1963), reader (1967) and professor (1970), he moved to the Nuffield chair in Oxford (also fellow of Pembroke College) in 1980, retiring as professor emeritus and honorary fellow of Pembroke in 1991.

### Professional interests and activities

Important early influences during his training were Drs Massey Dawkins, Bob Cope and Bernard Lucas, plus the year in the USA: the UCH scholarship allowing him to visit 41 North American hospitals, and gain his first experience of research. The project, a comparison of mortality after either ether or thiopentone/NMB anaesthesia, was inconclusive, but taught him much about research. At the Hammersmith he studied the management of tetanus, spending six months in Durban, South Africa, where his work reduced

mortality from 80 to 21 per cent. The experience stimulated his interest in ventilators, but back at the Hammersmith his activities focussed on anaesthesia for open-heart surgery (introducing artificial ventilation in postoperative care, and using then new methods of blood gas analysis in research), studying respiratory physiology (inspired by Drs Philip Hugh-Jones and John West), and setting up (on his return from Durban) the UK's first in-hospital resuscitation programme.

However, his interests soon came together with long term programmes on the respiratory effects of anaesthesia, major surgery and artificial ventilation. On moving to Oxford, and assuming the Nuffield Chair, he was initially occupied by reorganising the rather complicated inter-relationships between the NHS and University sides of the department. However, he benefitted from a University 'setting-up' grant and was soon able to establish a cardiorespiratory laboratory for studies of the pulmonary circulation and the effect of cardiovascular drugs on pulmonary shunting. Further supported by an impressive series of grants, and in collaboration with Pierre Foëx (who later succeeded him), this allowed continuation of his own studies and the training and supervision of many research workers, clinical and non-clinical. He also appointed two new independent researchers, John Sear (clinical pharmacology) and Henry McQuay (chronic pain), to widen the scope of the department.

At a personal level he maintained his clinical activities, including on-call, and taught medical students and trainees. The breadth of his research, interests and collaborations is reflected (from time in both centres) by the topics (and co-authors) of the books he was associated with: respiratory failure (McNichol MW, Campbell EJM), clinical measurement and monitoring (Vickers MD, Hull CJ), respiratory support (Young JD) and history of medicine/anaesthesia (Bunker J).

Many other publications resulted (over 150 original journal articles alone), as did requests to lecture in many centres, not just across the UK, but around the World – of the 16 major invited eponymous lectures he gave, nine were overseas.

In parallel with this considerable activity he gave huge support to the organisations of the specialty which, in turn, honoured him. The list is extensive, but notable are Faculty/RCoA: faculty board 1969-85, FFA examiner 1968-82, Clover medal 1976, Buxton prize 1980, Faculty medal 1980; AAGBI: council 1967-70 and 1986-9, editorial board 'Anaesthesia' 1992-7, vice-president 1990-2, hon member 1992, Snow medal 1992; BJA board 1978-89; ARS: founder member and speaker at first meeting 1958, hon member 1992; RSM section: president 1989-90, Hickman medal 2008; HAS: council 2003-6, hon member 2007. Awarded honorary fellowships by both South African (1979) and Australian / New Zealand (1989) Colleges, and honorary membership of eight overseas societies, he was, in 1980, elected MA by Oxford University. Beyond the specialty he contributed to hospital, university and national committees, these indicating his wider range of interests: academia, education, administration and clinical standards. Such involvement made him a natural for appointment as Consultant Advisor in Anaesthetics to the CMO at the Department of Health in 1986, a position earning him his knighthood in 1991 and which he held until 1992.

### Other biographical information

Married to Michelle (nee Ratcliffe), an art historian, they had four children, although Michelle and two of them predeceased him. Recreations included gardening, stone carving, sailing, natural history and music.

### Reference

<sup>1</sup> Professor Sir Keith Sykes. RCoA ([rcoa.ac.uk/professor-sir-malcolm-keith-sykes](http://rcoa.ac.uk/professor-sir-malcolm-keith-sykes))

For information on the Lives of the Fellows project please visit:

[rcoa.ac.uk/about-college/heritage/lives-fellows](http://rcoa.ac.uk/about-college/heritage/lives-fellows)