

Tribute to Dr. Denys Ford

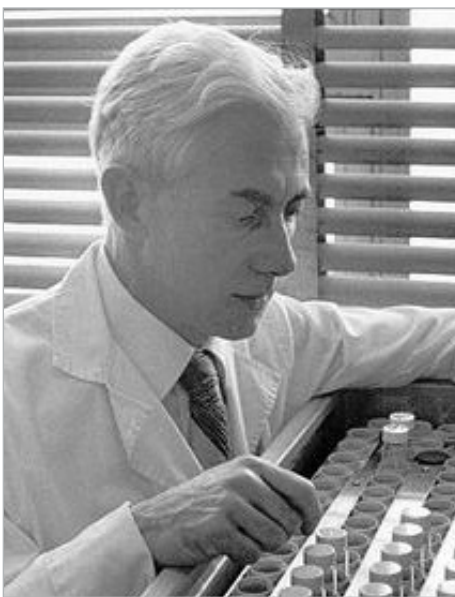
By Barry Koehler, MD, FRCPC; and Graham Reid, MB, ChB, FRCPC

Denys Ford had a long and full life. His determined commitment to research in rheumatology spanned over 50 years at the University of British Columbia (UBC) in Vancouver. Along with Dr. Harold Robinson and Mary Pack, he was a pioneer of rheumatology in British Columbia.

Denys was born near Stoke-on-Trent, England. He spent his initial two years of medical school at Cambridge, completing his BA in Medical Sciences and obtaining a first. In 1944, on the recommendation of his supervisor, he attended Columbia University on a Rockefeller Student Fellowship, where he completed his third and fourth clinical years. (His trans-Atlantic passage was on the Queen Mary, known for her ability to avoid submarines.) He then spent four months at McGill University as an intern, after which he returned to England to spend three years as a house physician, his last rotation being in Rehabilitation at London Hospital. In 1949, his head of service, Dr. W.S. Tegner, arranged for him to attend New York University on a fellowship to study cortisone, along with future rheumatology greats Currier McEwen, Morris Ziff and Joseph Bunim. He then returned to London Hospital as a Registrar, where his lifelong interest in the connection of infection and arthritis continued; his MD thesis was a study on patients with arthritis and urethritis, then termed "venereal arthritis."

In 1953, he accepted a Research Fellowship in Clinical Investigation at Vancouver General Hospital and continued his studies in venereally-acquired arthritis, including the association of non-gonococcal urethritis and arthritis, and of arthritis following enteric infection. (His first lab was located in the basement of his rooming house.)

In 1960, Denys was appointed the first Head of Rheumatology at the University of British Columbia, a position he occupied until 1983. He continued to pursue his interest in the possible role of an underlying microbial origin for the overlying autoimmune mechanisms in most cases of rheumatoid arthritis. This included a number of publications on Rubella-associated arthritis. His lab operated until 1991. His scientific publications totaled 81, as well as 8 book chapters. His last paper was published in 2003



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at age 80. His last presentation to the UBC Division of Rheumatology educational rounds was in 2016 at age 93, when he summarized his research over the years.

It was a frustration to him that other centres reported failure to reproduce his findings of synovial fluid lymphocyte reactivity to microbial antigenic stimulation. However, Denys always processed the synovial fluid on reception in his lab, no matter the time of day. Investigators in other centres elected to freeze the specimens for more convenient processing, failing to recognize that freezing the specimens altered lymphocyte reactivity.

Some of his other publications addressed his concerns regarding government funding and, hence, control of the delivery and the costs of health care. Well into his eighties, he had continuing correspondence with politicians, members of medical organizations, and of the press. He lived to see how prescient his concerns were.

In 1993, he was named a Master of the American College of Rheumatology and, in 2000, Senior Member of the Canadian Medical Association.

Denys leaves his wife, Marguerite, to whom he was married for 68 years, four children, seven grandchildren, and five great-grandchildren.

On retirement, he volunteered many hours in his community as a Meals-on-Wheels driver and with the Disabled Sailing Association. His energy and enthusiasm were evident throughout all aspects of his daily activities. He continued playing tennis regularly into his eighties and was a local eccentric legend.

His kind, generous and charitable persona is attested to by his trainees (from the first, Manfred Harth, to the last, Graham Reid), by his professional colleagues, and by his community.

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