

Mike Tyers, 1946–2017



Dr Mike Tyers worked as a pharmacologist at Glaxo and then GlaxoWellcome for nearly 40 years and during those years was proud to be part of the pharmacology tradition within the company. He died peacefully on 23rd June 2017, after a long illness. He provided tremendous leadership for those of us who worked for him during those years and I will always remember his enthusiasm for discovering new medicines, and his great humanity and sense of fun.

Mike studied pharmacology as part of his B.Sc. which he completed in 1968. He carried out a project on muscarinic receptors which was written up in a bound volume. This included various smoked drum traces, giving us some idea as to the vintage! He carried out a Ph.D. whilst working at Glaxo, studying ultra-short-acting neuromuscular blockers, completing it in 1975.

Mike's biggest contribution to medicine was the discovery of the 5HT₃ receptor antagonist Ondansetron (Zofran), which was launched for chemotherapy-induced emesis in 1990. Mike pioneered the study of 5HT₃ receptors at Glaxo, but when the compound was first made, it was a drug looking for an indication. Ondansetron entered clinical trials initially for migraine, and although it did not reduce the pain, it did reduce the accompanying emesis and Mike championed further studies in emesis (in ferrets before humans!). I will always remember the stories that were relayed back to Glaxo from patients, about the difference Zofran made to their cancer treatment. Before the launch of the drug, chemotherapy was accompanied by days of nausea and vomiting, which was so bad that by the third or fourth cycle, patients would anticipate sickness even on their way to hospital. Zofran was very effective in completely eradicating nausea and vomiting and 5HT₃ antagonists still form the mainstay of anti-emetic treatment after chemotherapy. Zofran was also

launched for post-operative nausea and vomiting. The Prix Galien was awarded to Glaxo in 1990 for the launch of Zofran and, as project leader, Mike received the award on behalf of the team. He has been given many personal awards, including the Mullard award in 1997 for his work on serotonin receptors and The Discoverer award from the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America in 1997. He was given a honorary professorship at Bradford University in 1994.

Life at Glaxo was characterised by hard work and great productivity but also great fun, and Mike loved to share in the fun. He was a key part of the interdepartmental netball team, where he played a goal shooter, somewhat helped by the fact that at 6 feet 5 inches tall, he could just pop the ball into the net. Practical jokes were a frequent occurrence, including the time when we threw some 'stain' over Malcolm Skingle's back and then sent him to the Personnel Department to get a refund on his shirt. It was actually disappearing ink so by the time he got there it had completely gone, much to the bemusement of the head of Personnel.

Mike's career was cruelly cut short by his diagnosis of a brain tumour, and he retired in 1999. However, this was a minor miracle in itself because, having been given a very poor prognosis, Mike opted for pioneering treatment in the US and went on to live for many more years. The last few years must have been very hard for him as he developed a brain neurodegenerative disorder, probably a delayed effect of the radiotherapy he received many years earlier. But even here Mike was inspirational, rarely complaining and always more concerned about his family than himself.

Apart from an illustrious career, Mike also had many interests. As a young man, he travelled around the world bell-ringing with his brother; he was a serious rower and even rowed as a 'veteran' until his illness; and he was a wonderful photographer. After his retirement, he trained to become a Reader in the Church of England and played an active role in the church. He had five children Clare, Mark, Naomi, Josie and Issy, and six grandchildren. Mike will be remembered for his legacy contribution to cancer therapy, but also for his kind and generous nature as a father, husband, grandfather, and friend to so many, and for his joy for life.

Ann Hayes