Enthusiastic researcher and skilled administrator

Kevin John Lafferty was born in Melbourne on 3 July, 1933. He studied for his Bachelor of Science at the University of Melbourne while working at the Commonwealth Serum Laboratories, graduating in 1956. He was then transferred to the John Curtin School of Medical Research (JCSMR) as a PhD scholar and worked in the Department of Microbiology with Stephen Fazekas de St Groth, on the neutralisation of viruses by serum antibody. After graduating in 1960 he moved to the Ontario Cancer Institute in Canada as a postdoctoral fellow. In 1963 he returned to Australia as a research fellow in the Department of Microbiology of the JCSMR, and turned his attention to the response of the choroid-iacnentoic membrane of the developing chick embryo to the inoculation of foreign lymphocytes, a phenomenon that was called the Simonsen phenomenon. With this change in interest from virology to transplantation biology, he was moved to the Department of Experimental Pathology as a Fellow, a tenured appointment. Here he collaborated with Professor Bede Morris and other colleagues in the Department on various aspects of transplantation biology. In 1970 he accompanied Morris to the newly established Department of Immunology in the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute. He then made his most important scientific discovery, the fact that a "stimulator"—which was supplied by the antigen-presenting cells—was required for T-cell activation and the consequent graft rejection. This ran against current dogma in transplantation biology, and was published by leading figures in the field. His work was widely accepted, and showed that by maintaining cells of the mouse thyroid gland or pancreatic islet cells (cells that produce insulin) in culture for some days before transplanting them to mice, the stimulator was lost and the tissue was not rejected. Since diabetes is caused by the lack of functional pancreatic islet cells, such a method of transplantation opened up the possibility of developing a cure for diabetes.

The remainder of Kevin’s scientificlife was devoted to the study of diabetes. He was promoted to be a Professorial Fellow in 1980 and was appointed Head of a small Transplantation Biology Unit. He had now become a frequent visitor to the United States, and in 1982 he was invited to become Research Director at the Barbara Davis Center for Childhood Diabetes in Denver, Colorado, and was offered an endowed Chair at the University of Colorado. He moved to Denver in 1983, to lead a research group studying the biology of pancreatic islet transplantation and the pathogenesis of autoimmune diabetes. He also became involved in fundraising activities and was a member of various review committees of the National Institutes of Health.

The scientific importance of his research was recognised by the Paul E. Lacy Research Award of the National Diabetes Research Interchange in 1986, the International Award of the Juvenile Diabetes Foundation in 1988 and, in 1995, he was awarded the prestigious Sanford Prize for Basic Immunology — all awards in recognition of his work in transplantation biology.

Early in 1993 Lafferty applied for the position of Director of the John Curtin School of Medical Research, although he recognised that in so doing he would earn only about half as much as he did in the United States. He was appointed Director and Howard Florey Professor of Medical Research from September 1993 until he reached the age of 65 in July 1998. On taking up his appointment he launched a five-year strategic plan for the School, the goals of which were:

- to encourage the development of young investigators as independent scientists,
- to strengthen existing research activities and to introduce new research activities that would maintain the School’s leadership into the future,
- to enhance student teaching and training, and
- to develop links between the basic science thrust of the School and patient-oriented clinical studies.

He warned staff of the School of the diminishing income available to it from the Commonwealth Government and of the increasing need for members of the academic staff to seek funding from outside sources. His warnings were justified by experience, later in his period as Director the block grant, in constant (1998$) terms, fell from $24.2 million to $19 million. This was offset to some extent by a rise in external funding, from all sources, of $3.2 million in 1993 to $7.4 million in 1998.

During his period as Director he brought several new initiatives to the School. The most important of these were the Medical Genome Centre, funded in part by the Australian Genome Foundation, to promote research aiming at defining the genes that underpin human health, and the Computational Molecular Biology and Drug Design Group, aimed at relating protein structure and function. Integrative neuroscience and studies on cytokine gene transcription were strengthened, and a National Collaborating Centre for Autoimmunity, and the Molecular Basis of Memory Project established.

A major initiative was the establishment of the externally funded National Health Sciences Centre, bringing together the JCSMR, the Canberra Clinical School of Sydney University, the ACT Department of Health and Community Affairs and the University of Canberra. This Consortium helped raise money for research, supervised the performance of clinical trials at The Canberra Hospital and conducts a very successful graduate education program in Clinical Trials Management at the University of Canberra. Kevin also established other close links with the ACT government, bringing former Chief of Registrars Ronald Finlay and Kaye Carnell to the School to open new laboratories and unveil the sculpture of Florey left as a bequest by Florey’s widow.

After retiring at age 65 he carried on work on a Diabetes Clinical Trials Unit, which was funded by a five-year grant from the Juvenile Diabetes Foundation International, the Juvenile Diabetes Foundation of Australia and the National Health and Medical Research Council. He moved his laboratory to the Innovations Building, next to the JCSMR, established an office in the ANU Centre for the Public Awareness of Science and continued to oversee a major clinical trial for the treatment of diabetes.

His graduate students attest to his skill as a teacher, bringing to the task enthusiasm, a liking for discussions of the philosophy of science, and the ability to see the core of a problem through the forest of detail that necessarily embeds it.

On the more social side of the School’s activities, he introduced the idea of an Annual Retreat, initially held at Central Tilba, on the South Coast, and later at Thredbo, where all members of the School could meet for broad-ranging discussions about current work and future directions. During the five years that he was Director the number and variety of scientific conferences hosted by the School was expanded considerably, one of the most notable being the Florey Centenary Symposium on the bacterium Helicobacter pylori and peptic ulcer, a discovery in the early 1980s by two Western Australians, Robert and Phillip Stanhope.

So much for Lafferty the scientist and science administrator. What of Lafferty the man? He was physically large and heavy in manner and when relating told a good story. Unfortunately, the last 20 years of his life were dogged by periods of serious ill health, and while visiting the United States he was twice taken to hospital for cardiac surgery to save his life. Once back on deck, he went ahead with his work and his life with undiminished vigour. He died on 21 July after a prolonged illness, for the last few days in The Canberra Hospital. He is survived by his wife Anne; six sons, Bede, twins Matthew and Daniel, Joseph, Ben and Damian; and two daughters, Bridget and Rachael.

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