A foreign view

The creation of the Liver Unit at King’s College Hospital Medical School by Roger Williams signified a historical landmark for hepatology in the United Kingdom, Europe, and the rest of the world. The scientific contribution of the Liver Unit at King’s has been very important and of extraordinary quality. The topics investigated on the liver have been many, however, but in my opinion, acute hepatic failure, liver transplantation, immunology, and the liver and portal hypertension and its consequences, stand out among others.

Without a doubt research on acute hepatic failure and the construction of an intensive care unit devoted exclusively to the treatment of this very grave disease allowed a better understanding of different complications of this syndrome. In this sense, the development and application of artificial liver support was to be praised. The increased knowledge of this syndrome has today allowed liver transplantation in these patients to be indicated on a more rational and scientific basis, up to the point where transplantation can be a truly efficient treatment for this clinical condition.

The Liver Unit at King’s in close collaboration with Professor Roy Calne from Cambridge were, together with Dr T Starzl of the United States, the pioneers of liver transplantation. Both Roger Williams and Roy Calne fearlessly faced the first difficult years of liver transplantation with scientific rigor. I am sure that I am not exaggerating when I say that most European hepatologists have looked to the Liver Unit at King’s to establish a successful liver transplant programme.

The application of the knowledge of modern immunology in the study of hepatic diseases has been another great scientific contribution by the Liver Unit. In this area Roger Williams was fortunate to have Adrian Eddleston by his side. Numerous data have been published in this field and thanks to these investigations, we now know the pathogenesis of chronic hepatitis, hepatic cirrhosis, and primary biliary cirrhosis much better. In addition, this has allowed the establishment of more rational treatment of these diseases.

Finally, the Liver Unit at King’s was precisely the place where sclerotherapy of oesophageal varices was developed. This treatment represented great progress in the management of gastrointestinal haemorrhage caused by the rupture of oesophageal varices. In the field of portal hypertension there have also been other contributions of great importance, such as better knowledge of physiopathology and the pharmacological treatment of this syndrome, particularly in emergency treatment of gastrointestinal haemorrhage.

The scientific contribution made has been much greater than I could possibly have indicated here and I can say that most hepatic diseases have been investigated at the Liver Unit at King’s, although it is obvious that all the scientific contributions cannot be extensively commented upon in this brief review.

I cannot finish without pointing out that the Liver Unit at King’s has been the melting pot for many investigators not only from the United Kingdom but also from other parts of Europe and the rest of the world. I am sure that in most countries of the world there will be found hepatologists who have trained at the Liver Unit which is so skillfully directed by Roger Williams.

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