

Mr Patrick C. Steptoe CBE FRS FRCOG

**Blue Plaque ceremony
Witney, Oxfordshire
4th May 2019**

**Homage by Dr Peter R. Brinsden FRCOG FRGS
(Past Medical Director of Bourn Hall Clinic, Cambridge)**

It is a great honour and pleasure for me to participate in this ceremony today to honour a man for whom I had in his lifetime, and for whose memory I have, the greatest affection and respect.

It is almost impossible for me adequately to cover the professional life and achievements of Patrick Christopher Steptoe in this short time and to attribute to him the honour he deserves. I will endeavour, however, to give a personal perspective on what I believe to be some of the highlights of his career.

I first had knowledge of Patrick Steptoe in 1971, when I was a young hospital registrar training in gynaecology. His then recently released textbook *Laparoscopy in Gynaecology* became my 'Bible' when learning the new procedure of laparoscopy, of which he was a world pioneer and the first man in England to use the laparoscope in gynaecology. I remember telling my then boss that this technique was the future of gynaecological diagnosis and treatment, but, like so many of his generation, he was very doubtful of its usefulness and very concerned about its safety.

As a result of his work in laparoscopy and his ability to see the ovaries and therefore to be able to retrieve a woman's eggs, he and Professor Robert (Bob) Edwards first came together in 1968 after they met at the Royal Society of Medicine in London, where Steptoe was delivering a lecture on the usefulness of laparoscopy in gynaecology – mainly then for sterilisation procedures.

They worked together – a gynaecologist, a scientist, and Jean Purdy, a nurse and laboratory assistant – for ten years. Steptoe at that time was working in Oldham, while Edwards was in Cambridge at the University.

The pioneering work of these three was carried out in Dr Kershaw's Cottage Hospital, near to Oldham. The tiny Laboratory next to the operating theatre was a converted broom cupboard, where they pursued their research, mainly in the evenings and at night, since they all had full-time day jobs. During these years of research and treatment they received heavy criticism of their work from many sources, notably from Dr James Watson (of DNA fame), who said: "It [IVF] is dabbling in infanticide"; the Bishop of Liverpool said: "it is morally wrong". The Vatican stated that this was: "An event which can have very grave consequences for humanity."

To cut a long story short, after more than 104 failed attempts at achieving a pregnancy by *in vitro* fertilisation (IVF), a patient, Mrs Leslie Brown, attended Patrick Steptoe's clinic and, following treatment by IVF, she achieved success. She had a stormy pregnancy and much

secrecy had to surround her at that time. The hospital was besieged by the press and there were even bomb threats, which once required the hospital to be evacuated! Finally, on 25th July 1978, Louise Joy Brown was born, the World's first "test tube baby". There was worldwide press coverage and Louise was dubbed "Baby of the Century".

In spite of all the earlier criticism of their work on IVF, when Steptoe and Edwards presented the results of their work later in 1978 at the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists in London, they received a standing ovation; something which had never occurred before in the whole history of the College. At the American Fertility Society meeting in 1978 they also received a standing ovation at the end of their presentation.

Other major achievements at around that time included founding the British Fertility Society, of which he became President (which I also had much later). He later also became President of the International Federation of Fertility Societies. He was also well known for playing the piano at various international meetings. An award given by the French that caused him very considerable delight was that of Chevalier, and later Commodore, de Tastevin – acknowledging his love for and expertise in wine.

Such acclaim for their achievements in their work by their peers, however, did not stop continued severe criticism by others, and no funding for further research or treatment was made available to them by any of the Universities, the Medical Research Council, or other bodies. Patrick Steptoe and Bob Edwards had, therefore, to set up a private IVF clinic at Bourn Hall, close to Cambridge, where Bob was working. Opened in 1980, this became the World's first specialist IVF clinic.

I joined Bourn Hall Clinic as a young consultant gynaecologist, with my primary interest in fertility and infertility, in early 1985. It may have been because I, like Steptoe, had also been trained at King's College and St George's Hospital in London and had spent 20 years in the Navy (yes – as a gynaecologist!), retiring in 1982 in the rank of Surgeon Commander, that Patrick Steptoe recruited me on my CV alone, without any initial interview!

I remember so well learning the fundamentals of this new specialty of IVF at Bourn Hall. In particular I remember how Steptoe was almost obsessive about the importance of doing one's very best for each and every patient and the quality of their care. He was a hard taskmaster! Being taught by him how to collect oocytes/eggs via the laparoscope was quite daunting, but he was always a very supportive teacher. I remember in particular our lunchtime meetings at which most of the team would sit down and discuss and analyse each patient's care – from all aspects of their treatment – the clinical aspects led by Steptoe and the scientific side led by Edwards – fascinating times and a wonderful way to learn about the management of IVF patients' treatment.

Sadly, sometime after I left Bourn Hall for the first time, Patrick became ill with cancer and died on 21 March 1988, at what seems to me now, at 79, to be the comparatively young age of 74! I then had the privilege of being invited back to Bourn Hall as Medical Director in his place.

Awards, from universities and other august institutions around the world, were heaped upon Patrick Steptoe towards the end of his life. He was appointed CBE by Her Majesty the

Queen in 1988, shortly before he died. This and being made a Fellow of the Royal Society were almost certainly his crowning accolades. He would, had he lived longer, almost certainly have been knighted, as Bob was in 2011, towards the end of his life. It is also likely that he would have shared the Nobel Prize for Physiology or Medicine awarded to Bob in 2010.

As a result of the pioneering work of Patrick Steptoe, Robert Edwards, and Jean Purdy, an estimated eight million or more babies have been born worldwide to date from the IVF technologies pioneered by these 'greats' whose achievements we celebrate today. Much of the early history of their experience is recorded in a fascinating book titled *A Matter of Life*, written by Steptoe and Edwards in 1980.

Steptoe's passion to help infertile couples is to be found in many of his papers and publications. It is exemplified by his sheer dogged determination to pursue his ambitions for infertile couples, in spite of the hostility of 'the establishment' and having to perform his pioneering laparoscopic work within the context of a very busy National Health Service gynaecological and obstetric practice. Following the birth of Louise Brown in 1978, Steptoe was quoted in *Time Magazine* as saying: "I am not a wizard or a Frankenstein. All I want to do is to help women whose child-producing mechanisms are slightly faulty".

Bob Edwards, in a tribute to Patrick Steptoe's life at the Royal Society in 1989, ended his talk by saying: "Great charm carried him through many difficult situations, inspired enormous devotion in his staff and patients and no doubt helped to carry him through much of the criticism aimed at him. The consequences of his work have spread everywhere. Laparoscopy has been equally successful as his work on IVF. He remained cultured in his love of food, music and wine, passionately determined to help his patients, charming when he wished to be, and brusque when he did not! He was optimistic, good natured, reliable, and a deeply affectionate family man. Popular at Bourn Hall, many staff and patients admired him almost beyond belief. He was unflinchingly loyal to his patients and friends.

In a recently published book on the history of *in vitro* fertilisation around the world, which I co-edited, I have used a quote by Professor Andrew Steptoe, Patrick's son from whom you have just heard, which I would like to quote as, to me, it sums up the life of this remarkable man who we are honouring today. Andrew Steptoe said in a meeting we had at Bourn Hall in 2008: "What does it mean to live a good and worthwhile life? One of the simplest ways of thinking about a good life is whether a person leaves the world a better place than they found it. I think, in this respect, Patrick led a very good life, helping in his own way to make the world a better place."

Thank you for the honour of allowing me to say a few words about the life of a man for whom I had and continue to have a profound respect. Very few of us manage to achieve in one lifetime as much as he, together with his friend and colleague Robert Edwards, did in their lifetimes. He and Bob are affectionately known as the 'fathers of IVF'; the fathers, in effect, of more than eight million babies worldwide. What a legacy!

Thank you.