Obituary

Dr Donald M. Walker, 1924-2007

Reader, Department of Animal Science, 1958-1988

Dr Don Midgely Walker was born in Leeds on 15 February 1924, the son of a textile mill owner. The family moved to Coventry in 1930, and he attended the Henry VIII Grammar school before embarking on undergraduate and postgraduate training in Agriculture at the University of Reading.

On completing his PhD studies, Don decided to extend his knowledge of cell biology by enrolling for a Masters course in Biochemistry at University College, London. At that time, he met Cliff Gallagher, who went on to become Professor of Pathology, and later, Dean of the Veterinary Faculty at the University of Sydney. Don Walker’s life long friendship with Professor Gallagher influenced his decision to move to Sydney some years later.

Dr Walker joined the Rowett Research Institute, Aberdeen, Scotland in 1951. At that time Dr Frank Annison had been seconded to the Rowett Institute, and thus began a friendship that continued when they were colleagues at Sydney University from 1974 until Don retired in 1988. Dr Walker, in his research at the Rowett Institute, established a reputation for his meticulous standards in both laboratory management and experiments in animals. These qualities characterised all facets of his career in teaching and research.

In 1954 Don Walker married Gwen Thomas, a fellow research scientist at the Rowett Institute. (Dr Gwen Walker, a microbiologist, in later years achieved international recognition for her research on tooth decay at the Sydney Dental Hospital.) A year later Don accepted a Lectureship at the Royal Veterinary College, London, but a heavy teaching load restricted his research activity. He readily accepted an invitation to apply for a Senior Lectureship in the newly established Department of Animal Husbandry at Sydney University in 1958. On appointment, he was welcomed by the Foundation Professor, T.J. Robinson, as one of his key senior staff. Don became responsible for nutrition courses to both Veterinary Science and Agricultural Science students, and some years later, to dietitians. Dr Walker was made a Reader in 1972.

Don Walker continued his research on sheep nutrition began at the Rowett Institute, but for logistical reasons focused attention on quantitative energy balances, and supported a succession of postgraduate students. One of them, Dr Graham Faichney, went on to pursue a successful career in ruminant physiology with the CSIRO at the Prospect Laboratory. Dr Faichney, a founding member of NSA, was Secretary during the difficult early years when the Society was struggling to achieve its current status as the national authority on all matters concerning human and animal nutrition.

In the words of his long-serving technical officer, Irene Schouten (now Irene van Ekris) Don was a meticulous researcher and exacting taskmaster, expecting a high standard of laboratory work and housekeeping. He was also a "hands-on" supervisor, working side-by-side with his students and technicians in the development of new techniques. His pioneering work on the nutritive requirements of the young lamb and macropod joeys laid the foundation for the formulations of milk replacers commonly used today, both for "poddy lambs" by the farmer and by foster carers of joeys across the country.

From the mid 1970s to 1988, Don taught nutrition practical classes to groups of 20-30 students at the University of Sydney as part of the Diploma in Nutrition and Dietetics, which later became a 2-year Masters of Nutrition and Dietetics. As a junior lecturer, Jennie Brand-Miller was assigned to help Don in the classes for several afternoons each week. It was Don who encouraged Jennie to join the NSA, and to play an active role in the Society’s affairs. Before too long, Jennie found herself as Secretary of the local group, organizing food and wine after branch meetings, and annual dinners with gold invitations at the Sydney Opera House. Don often invited Jennie to join him at a regular event organized by the veterinary faculty staff called a ‘wine tasting lunch’ in which up to 24 different grape varietals were systematically sampled over a 2 hour period. They were wonderfully collegial and memorable affairs! Peter Williams also has fond memories of Don Walker’s teaching. Peter says ‘I remember him as a very warm and entertaining
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I was studying dietetics at Sydney in 1977. He had a gentle and courteous humour that endeared him to students. Not only did we learn about and use the Kejldahl methods and bomb calorimetry, he had us cooking very English foods to analyse, that many in the class had never tried before - such as Yorkshire pudding and ‘spotted dick’. I feel grateful to have been taught by a nutritionist who had a wide knowledge of all animal nutrition - not just human - and one who had a deep knowledge of the history of nutrition that enabled him to put his teaching into a broader perspective.

For many years Don Walker was the Australian representative on the International Committee of the European Association for Animal Production (EAAP). The EAAP in the 1960’s and 1970’s encouraged the development of indirect calorimetry for the accurate measurement of energy expenditure in livestock in order to develop reliable feeding standards. Much of the technology developed at that time found application in the construction of respiration chambers currently used in human nutrition.

Don Walker spent much of his leisure as a dedicated naturalist. His activities included bird and butterfly watching, the identification and protection of ground orchids in bushland, the eradication of undesirable invaders of the bush, such as lantana, and in his last years in Australia, he became an authority on the fungi of South Eastern Australia. When he returned to England to live on the Isle of Wight, he donated his collection of specimens of fungi, with field records, to the University of NSW Herbarium.

Don Walker retired in 1988. His wife, Gwen, died in 1997, at much the same time that an old school friend in the UK died. Don had remained in contact with the friend and his wife Peggy, who persuaded him to return to England in 2000. Don Walker died in July 2007, leaving behind a multitude of dietitians and nutritionists who treasure his memory.

With contributions from Frank Annison, Jennie Brand-Miller and Irene van Ekris