

PERCY LANE OLIVER O.B.E. (1878-1944)
Founder of the voluntary blood donor service

Could you put a name to the man who developed the system of volunteer blood donors which is now accepted as part of our health system? I have asked many people, including members of the medical profession, and while they know who was involved with cancer treatment, vaccination, anaesthetics and penicillin, hardly anyone outside the Blood Transfusion Service recognises the name of Percy Lane Oliver. I knew nothing of him, or the fact that he was born in my home town of St. Ives Cornwall, until I did some work on the transcription of part of the 1881 census involving St. Ives and was asked if I could find some information relating to Oliver's family. From this modest enquiry I found he and I had the same family roots, which kindled the desire to find more about him and to make him more widely known.

Blood has always had a fascination for the human race. Shakespeare's plays drip with it. Tracker dogs were called bloodhounds, and the Salvation Army incorporated it into its motto Blood and Fire. While the alchemists of old sought to transmute base metals into gold, others were experimenting with the replacement of 'worn-out' blood to treat senility and chronic diseases. In Greek mythology Medea, a magician, wife of Jason of the Argonauts, restored her aged father-in-law to the vigour and sprightliness of youth by drawing away the blood from his veins and filling them again with the juices of certain herbs. Sadly, efforts to find the recipe have been unsuccessful and the potion is not available on the NHS! Attempts were made in the 15th century to rejuvenate Pope Innocent VIII. In 1652 the Rev. Francis Potter, Vicar of Kilmarton in Somerset experimented with transfusions using a hen. It seems they did not have Medea's success.

It was not until 1818 that human blood was used, by syringe, and by this method casualties were treated in the Franco-Prussian war. In 1900 the four major blood groups were discovered, and in 1914 sodium citrate was found to be the ideal anti-coagulant. The casualties of the First World War gave surgeons opportunities of developing and improving the techniques of transfusion and in this they were helped by the readily available source of donors. Lightly wounded men were invited to act as donors, and rewarded with 14 days in "Blighty".

The experience gained in field hospitals was valuable in peacetime, but the post-war problem was the availability of donors. Some surgeons retained their own, whom they could call upon on demand and who were paid so much per session, but it was generally a rather hit and miss situation. All this, however, was to change as a result of a telephone call to Percy Lane Oliver in October 1921.

Percy Lane Oliver was born on 11th April 1878 at the home of his grandparents, Paul and Margery Cumow, in Fish Street, St. Ives. Paul Cumow was a blacksmith and relief keeper for Godrevy lighthouse in St. Ives Bay, as well as a highly respected lifeboat cox'n, whose decorations included a medal from Emperor Napoleon III. At the time of Percy's birth the Oliver family lived in Maidenhead, where his father and mother were teachers. The family moved to London around 1883, and in 1892 Percy won a Science and Art Scholarship. In 1893 he passed first in the CMI Service Examination out of 449 candidates, but was rejected by the Medical Board. One wonders how the course of medical history might have been changed if he had been accepted! Following this disappointment he got a job as Assistant librarian with Camberwell Borough Council in 1893, and in 1901 transferred to the Town Hall staff, where he remained until his retirement. He was a founder member of the Camberwell Division of the British Red Cross and became its Honorary Secretary in 1910.

During the First World War he served in the Royal Naval Air Service, stationed at Crystal Palace, and during his off-duty and leave periods he and his wife

engaged in considerable work in connection with refugees, organising and financially managing four refugee hostels in Camberwell. For this he was awarded the O.B.E. in 1918, the presentation being made by King George V personally. On leaving Buckingham Palace after receiving his award onlookers mistook his medal for a VC and chaired him down the road!

In October 1921, in his capacity as Hon. Sec. of the Camberwell Branch of the Red Cross, he received a telephone call from the nearby King's College Hospital. They were in urgent need of a blood donor and sought his help. He and a number of colleagues went to the hospital, and from them Sister Linstead, a Red Cross worker, was chosen, becoming the first voluntary blood donor. The results of this exercise so impressed Oliver that mainly with the help of his wife he set about devising and organising a system for a panel of donor volunteers, whose health and blood details were checked by the Hospital and kept on record cards in his home, where there was continuous telephone cover. In the first year there were four members of the panel and they had one call. Five years later there were 400 members and over 700 calls. Oliver was convinced that organised panels of volunteer donors were the answer and he worked hard at setting up similar panels, particularly in London, with the help of groups such as St. John Ambulance, Toc H and the Rover Scouts. To cope with the organisation and the paperwork it was also necessary to move to a larger house! Much of his free time was spent travelling round the country, explaining the system and encouraging the formation of yet more local groups of volunteers.

Although on its inception in 1921 Oliver called it the London Blood Transfusion Service, it was really a voluntary donor service for local hospitals. It progressed to the stage where the official support of the British Red Cross Society was considered essential. This was forthcoming and in 1926 it became the British Red Cross Blood Transfusion Service, later changed to the Greater London Red Cross B.T. Service and eventually developed into the National Blood Transfusion Service which is so familiar to us today. General hospitals were not charged for the service and no payment was ever made to, or expected by, the donors. The expenses of running the organisation from the house in South London were met by charging private clinics, by grants from Institutions, and by Oliver's own efforts.

Oliver had the support of many eminent surgeons and doctors, but there were others who resented this intrusion into medical preserves by a layman. Many donors had to keep their involvement secret from families and employers, and as recently as 1940 Percy Oliver was still travelling the country trying to dispel apprehensions and encourage the supply of donors and the setting up of panels. In February of that year he returned to St. Ives where he gave an illustrated lecture at which the Area Secretary of Toc H asked those present "... not to stand in the way of would-be donors, but rather to go out and radiate the wonderful work that had been done and was being done by blood transfusion..."

Oliver's work attracted attention worldwide and many countries sent representatives who sought and acted upon his advice on setting up similar organisations. In 1937 an exhibition at a meeting of the Voluntary Blood Donors Association featured the idea of stored blood which, although originally used by Canadian doctors in the first war, had been brought to the fore in the Spanish Civil War. This was to become the basis of the war-time blood bank which Oliver helped to create at Luton in 1939. Surprisingly Oliver received no official recognition for his work in the development of voluntary blood donor panels, although in later years he was invited back to the Palace to talk with the King about his work.

Percy Lane Oliver died on 16th April 1944, but his achievements are not forgotten. A memorial consisting of a portrait and a panel with an appropriate inscription was unveiled in the entrance hall of the Haematology Department of King's College Hospital, London in 1972 by Her Royal Highness The Duchess of Gloucester. A framed copy of this is in every Regional Transfusion Centre in Britain, and another is in the Donor Centre in Rome, bearing a suitable translation. In 1979

the Greater London Council provided an appropriate plaque on the house in South London where so much of Oliver's work was undertaken. Those who worked with him established a Memorial Fund which each year makes an award to a medical or lay nominee, year and year about, in recognition for outstanding service in the field of blood transfusion. This is a prestigious award and recognised as such by those in the business. The Fund also offers modest grants to young scientists involved in appropriate research projects.

While Oliver's work was recognised in London, in Regional Transfusion Centres around the country, and in Rome, there was nothing in the town of his birth, and arising from discussions with his daughter, her family, and officers of the Memorial Fund, it was proposed that a plaque be erected in St. Ives. It so happened that a new Health Centre was due to open, which would provide an ideal location. The concept was warmly supported by the St. Ives Town Council and the Doctors who would be occupying the Health Centre, and on Friday 11th April 1992 a suitably inscribed Cornish granite plaque, accompanied by a portrait, was unveiled by the Mayor in the presence of Lady Limerick, Chairman of the British Red Cross Society, members of Oliver's family and Mr. Frank Hanley, who worked with Percy Oliver and was for many years Chairman of the Memorial Fund.

While these memorials remind us of where Oliver was born and where he lived and worked, his greatest memorial is in the voluntary blood donor organisations around the world which he worked so hard to create. So the next time you see a blood transfusion van travelling at speed with its blue light flashing, or when you or a relative have a blood transfusion, spare a thought for Percy Lane Oliver, Sister Linstead and the army of voluntary donors and organisers; and if you have the time, see if there is anything you can do to help carry on the work he started.