

INFORMATION FROM THE OLIVER MEMORIAL FUND – PUBLISHED 1994

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Fifty Years Of The Blood Transfusion Service

The first breakthrough came in 1900 with the discovery of four major blood groups. The second came in 1914 when sodium citrate was found to be the ideal anticoagulant. The heavy casualties of World War One gave surgeons the opportunity to practice transfusion, they had the advantage of donors being to hand.

After that war, hospitals were still burdened with the wounded and transfusions were seldom, shortage of donors and lack of knowhow contributing. It was this shortage which caused King's College Hospital to telephone the Red Cross Camberwell branch one evening in October 1921 to ask for volunteers. The Secretary and five others went there and one, a woman, being of the right group gave her blood returning later very elated by her experience.

There had been an upsurge of desire for voluntary service following the war and the branch secretary, P.L. Oliver who had already received the O.B.E. for his work with refugees realised that the provision of blood donors would be a worthwhile task. Supported by his colleagues he started a small panel, arranging with the hospital to examine and group them. He used a room in his house as an office and there kept the record cards and a telephone which was always attended. This set-up he called the London Blood Transfusion Service.

Oliver threw himself wholeheartedly into this new venture and set about creating other donor panels. His free time and holidays were spent visiting towns and cities speaking and advising on their formation. He had considerable support from the recently formed Rover Scouts, Toc H, St. John Ambulance and similar organisations. Whilst he had the support of many eminent doctors and surgeons, in some instances his efforts were treated as an unwarranted intrusion. It took considerable persuasion to get people to enroll, this was something new and there were fears of the unknown.

However progress was made to such an extent that in 1926 he felt that the Service being so vital to London with its many hospitals and huge population he needed the official support of the British Red Cross Society. This he got and henceforth his service became the B.R.C.S. Blood Transfusion Service later changed to the Greater London Red Cross B.T. Service.

Apart from small financial help at first from his branch, Oliver and his colleagues raised all the money to run it from the earliest days until the formation of the National Health Service in 1948.

In May 1928 Oliver moved to a larger house where staff could be employed more efficiently. The General Hospitals were not charged for donors, private clinics were expected to pay and some institutions made grants. Money had to be found to pay the Staff of two or three, pay office expenses and refund donors out-of-pocket expenses. Never at any time were donors paid, something which has continued to this day. Oliver still worked for the Camberwell Borough Council to keep himself and his family.

All this had not passed unnoticed and visitors from overseas came and sought Oliver's advice on setting up their own panels. His medical advisors had laid down a technique for the treatment of donors on which Oliver firmly insisted. As all blood drawn was used immediately for a particular patient the only laboratory was that of the Service Medical Officer at St. Bartholomew's Hospital where donors were examined on enrolment and after every ten donations.

An Executive Committee with Oliver as honorary secretary was formed with representatives from supporting organisations. In 1932 an organisation called the Voluntary Blood Donors Association was set up to bring donors into closer touch with each other by social functions, meetings and a quarterly journal. It also provided the means for electing representatives to the Executive Committee.

At one of these gatherings in 1937 a small exhibition featured the idea of stored blood which the Spanish Civil War had publicised. Actually the Canadian doctors had used it in World War One but it had fallen into abeyance. The development of this was the mainstay of our War-time blood bank.

Blood transfusion services had spread throughout the world and at an international congress in Rome in 1935 a tribute was paid by the Belgian delegate to Oliver's Red Cross Service for pioneering this form of social service. Again in 1948 at Turin it was referred to as the world's most senior service.

Such was the fruit of Oliver's labours that by 1939 no part of the country was out of reach of a donor panel. More than fifty were affiliated to the London Service and on this foundation the war-time blood bank got off to a flying start.

Such was their devotion to the cause that donors would go at any time day or night to any hospital requiring their blood. With a panel of 2,500 men and women the Service was reaching 6,000 cases a year. For every call the hospital was required to return a report giving details of the case and the result, a copy of which was given to the donor.

Oliver had not spared himself and largely as a result of his untiring efforts, he died in April 1944 at the age of 66. For his outstanding service to suffering humanity he received no public recognition, he would not have wished it. The knowledge of his achievement was its own reward. All that he would have asked was that his work should continue.

His colleagues were determined that his name and work should not be forgotten and considered how best to ensure this. So came into being the Oliver Memorial Fund. Fearing that with the end of the war enthusiasm would wane and the blood bank cease, they set out to raise funds so that the pre-war local panels could be restarted.

The reverse was the case. The national set-up continued and with the coming of the National Health Service became firmly established as an everyday feature of our lives. There was still a place for the Red Cross Service in supplying donors directly to hospitals which it continued to do, growing in numbers of donors and cases.

The Fund had other ideas but finally settled for giving public recognition and appreciation to both the medical fraternity and lay people whose work in this field whether scientific or organisational was the most outstanding in any one year.

It has always been a source of great satisfaction to all associated with this work that the high ideals of pre-war services have been maintained and volunteers still come forward.

The torch which Oliver lighted in 1921 has burned brightly ever since and the 20th century has seen the dream of centuries come true the repeatedly successful transference of healthy elements from the fit to the ailing to the spiritual and physical benefit of both donor and patient.

The Annual Award made by the Fund consists of an inscribed plaque bearing a medallion of P.L. Oliver and a cheque for £50. It is awarded alternately to a medical nominee and a lay nominee who must be British Subjects. There have been thirty three awards, some to people in far away places like Northern Rhodesia and Hong Kong, but mostly in the British Isles.

The Fund commissioned a memorial consisting of an oil painting of Percy Lane Oliver OBE, and a panel bearing this inscription:

Voluntary Blood Donation Service
1921 – 1971

“From King’s College Hospital in October 1921 Mr. Percy Lane Oliver of The Red Cross in Camberwell received an urgent call for a blood donor. This showed him the need for Voluntary Blood Donor Panels at a time when these were unknown. By the Second World War he had created a network covering the whole country. His was the first Blood Transfusion Organisation. It gave impetus to the formation of the National Service in this country and inspired the creation of similar panels throughout the world.”

This is in the entrance hall of the Haematology Department of King’s College Hospital, London, S.E.5 and was unveiled by her Royal Highness, The Duchess of Gloucester on 16th February 1972.

Every Regional Centre in the British Isles has a framed copy of this so that all may know our place in history and another is in the Donor Centre in Rome bearing a suitable translation.

Further information can be had from the Honorary Secretary, 321 Church Street, London, N.9.