Ciaran Bernard John Woodman

Cancer epidemiologist. He was born on June 3, 1954, in Belfast, UK, and died of a heart attack on April 11, 2015, while on holiday in Spain.

The early years of Ciaran Woodman’s medical career offer only limited clues to the direction it would eventually take, and to the job he was doing—Professor of Cancer Epidemiology at the University of Birmingham—at the time of his premature death. Having been dissuaded by his arts academic father from studying classics, he had signed up for medicine at University College, Galway, Ireland, graduating in 1977. Just a couple of years later he crossed the Irish Sea to train in obstetrics and gynaecology in mainland UK where, following a house job at the Birmingham and Midlands Hospital for Women, he embarked on a 2-year research fellowship in colposcopy and cervical pathology in the University of Birmingham’s Department of Medical Microbiology. After a further 2 years as a registrar in obstetrics and gynaecology, he applied for a lectureship, aiming for a clinical academic career in his specialty. His application was unsuccessful, an outcome that prompted his resignation on principle over what he viewed as the unfairness of the appointment procedure. “He did not tolerate injustice”, says Sean Kehoe, Lawson Tait Professor of Gynaecological Cancer at the University of Birmingham. “If he saw something that he thought was unjust he would not back off.”

Having by this time acquired a taste for research, Woodman turned his problem into an opportunity. Becoming a registrar in public health and a research fellow in the Department of Social Medicine, he abandoned clinical work in favour of an academic career of a different kind. The research for which he’ll be best remembered was on human papillomavirus (HPV), an area in which he continued to work throughout his life. Promoted to senior lecturer in 1989, he was appointed Director of Birmingham’s Cancer Epidemiology Unit and began to take a wider interest in the disease. He was also Director of the West Midlands regional cancer registry, at that stage the largest in the UK, covering about 10% of the population. 2 years later, he moved to the University of Manchester as Professor of Cancer Epidemiology and Public Health, and Director of its Centre for Cancer Epidemiology. In 2002, he made his final move back to Birmingham where he began to build an expertise in cancer epigenetics.

The HPV work on which his core reputation rests was a study launched in 1988. His original collaborator in this was Professor Lawrence Young, now Pro-Vice-Chancellor of the University of Warwick, but then a member of the same department as Woodman. The HPV study was a joint enterprise, says Young. “At that time there were no really sensitive tests for the virus, and there was a lot of misunderstanding about the natural history of HPV acquisition. Basically, we had a proposal in which we would collect cervical smears and blood every 6 months for 5 years from 2000 healthy young women between the ages of 16 and 19.” Despite admitting that they didn’t know exactly what they would do with their database, they managed to persuade their funders that its creation was a worthwhile endeavour—as indeed it proved. It allowed them to establish the early rate of disease progression in relation to the time of HPV infection. Moreover, the commencement of the study roughly coincided with the invention of the polymerase chain reaction (PCR) for amplifying small amounts of DNA. Realising that this would solve the problem they had had with the relative insensitivity of their HPV detection method, they adapted PCR for their purposes and became the first to publish on this application of the new technology. Their cohort was later to prove of value in other work, not least in the design of appropriate trials for testing an HPV vaccine.

Kehoe got to know Woodman at the beginning of the 1990s. “The real skill he had was an ability, irrespective of the topic, to grasp a problem, get the focus right, and then come up with a solution. He had that kind of a brain—an ability to unravel and simplify a complex issue.” Another Birmingham colleague, Paul Murray, Professor of Molecular Pathology, describes Woodman as a man who combined an easy manner with an incisive mind. “He could turn his hand to anything. And he could never do anything in a half-hearted way. He was very, very thorough.” Woodman leaves a wife, Miriam, and two sons.

Geoff Watts