

Obituary for David Conrad Taylor, BVMS FRCVS FZS

Born: 11 February 1934

Died: 29 January 2013

David Taylor, one of the pioneers of modern zoo and marine mammal medicine, sadly died this January after five years of retirement.

David was born and grew up in Rochdale, Lancashire, from where he attended Manchester Grammar School; he spent his spare time at the local veterinary practice. He entered Glasgow Veterinary School in 1951 and graduated BVMS in 1956, at the age of only 22, with a fistful of Commendation Medals. After a further year in Glasgow as a research student to Professor W. F. Jarrett, he joined the Rochdale practice where he was a partner until 1968.

By chance, the Rochdale practice had traditionally provided veterinary care for the animals at Manchester's Belle Vue Zoological Gardens and David took on this work immediately, retaining that consultancy until the zoo closed in 1976. His pioneering, enthusiastic, and innovative work with the zoo, and also with the annual winter circus, quickly gained him a wider reputation so that, when the circus world diversified into safari parks and the first dolphins began to enter the UK for public display, David was the obvious candidate for veterinary support. Typically, he threw himself into this work nationwide; in 1968, he left the practice and set up as an independent consultant in zoo medicine. He travelled and studied intensively to increase his knowledge, fitting in the first Fellowship of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (by examination) in a non-domestic animal subject, primates, along



the way. As one of a small select group of nine, David was a founding member of the International Association of Aquatic Animal Medicine in 1969, and later of the European Association for Aquatic Mammals in 1972.

David's work rapidly became international throughout Europe and, as this all started to become too much to manage, in 1973 he formed a partnership with Andrew Greenwood, fresh out of postgraduate work at Cambridge. Their practice expanded in 1976 when the International Zoo Veterinary Group (IZVG) was formed as a loose association with the California-based practice of Marty Dinnes, Jack Brundrett, and Jay Sweeney—all leaders in the fields of zoo and aquatic animal medicine. David continued to work full-time in zoological medicine, at least half of which was with his beloved whales, dolphins, and sea lions, right up until his retirement. His academic approach led to a number of publications in the field of clinical work with marine mammals.

What kind of man lay behind this unique career path? David was a larger-than-life character supported by a formidable intellect. Professionally, he brought superb observational and diagnostic skills, an encyclopaedic memory, and endless academic curiosity about natural history and comparative medicine to his work. Equally important, he brought generosity, humour, and an



emphatic “get on with it” approach to the work and to the people with whom he worked. A good example of the latter was in the early days when he was called to see a sick dolphin in a major European zoo. He arrived to find a group of eminent local professors who had been fruitlessly studying the case for days, standing by the pool wearing suits. David had the dolphin hauled out onto the side, stripped to his underpants, and got on with actually examining the animal.

David’s lively and gregarious character made him the life and soul of meetings, without having any particular interest in organisations for their own sake. This enabled him to befriend a wide range of people, from CEOs of leisure companies, zoo directors, and the “Popes of German pathology” (as he liked to call them) to the most junior dolphin trainer. He also took great interest in students and keen younger vets and was particularly proud of the previous assistants of the practice, all of whom went on to continue their careers in zoo medicine, and, of course, John Lewis and Sue Thornton who continued on to partnership in IZVG.

David’s energy also led him into a side career as a television presenter of studio-based animal programmes and as an author of over 50 books. These included several volumes of autobiography, which spawned a BBC TV series based on his life (*One by One*), and a Channel 5 series on the practice (*Flying Vets*), which gave a real flavour of the challenges and escapades of his career. In later years, he turned his writing skills to pet books and manuals, particularly about cats, which he loved.



During his retirement, David dedicated himself to the care of his first wife Shelagh, who survives him, together with his daughters, Stephanie and Lindsey, and his second wife, Christine. The avalanche of tributes sent in from colleagues and friends around the world indicate the high regard in which David was held and how sorely he will be missed.

Dr. Andrew Greenwood, VetMB
International Zoo Veterinary Group