

# Professor Roger Williams, liver transplant pioneer who also treated George Best – obituary

He helped to create the UK's first transplant programme and made his unit at King's College Hospital one of the world's most respected

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By Telegraph Obituaries

31 July 2020 • 6:19pm



Professor Roger Williams

Professor Roger Williams, who has died aged 88, was at the heart of international research into severe liver disease and its treatment for more than half a century; his profile was raised considerably in 2002 when his most famous patient, George Best, had a transplant following decades of alcoholism.

Williams, who was not a football fan, knew little about the Northern Irishman before he began treating him, but he soon succumbed to his charm.

“He never turned anything on,” recalled Williams. “He was just natural and extraordinarily nice, and people liked him for that reason. He was an excellent

patient. He did not always follow my advice but I never heard him complain once, however ill he was. With all the things I had to do for him, he would just say: ‘OK, Doc’.”

Williams appealed to bar staff across the land not to serve Best, but the great footballer was unable to curb his appetite



Away from medicine his principal passion was sailing

for booze, and died in 2005. It was a clearly emotional Williams who stood outside the hospital and announced that the end was near.

In 1968 Williams, working at King's College Hospital in London, had teamed up with Professor Roy Calne in Cambridge to develop a liver transplant programme; 40 years later there are 700 such procedures each year in England alone.

He established the King's unit as one of the best in the world, and it became a magnet for

trainees from around the globe; many of the world's leading hepatologists passed through on their way up the medical ladder. Knowing that extra cash was vital to his mission – "I spend some time every day looking for fresh sources of income," he told a reporter in 1975 – Williams became an expert in seducing charities, philanthropists and captains of industry.

Roger Stanley Williams was born at Bexleyheath in south-east London on August 28 1931, but when he was young the family moved to

Southampton, where his father, Stanley, worked as an engineer with Harland and Wolff.

Stanley had also spent a period working for a tin mine at Jos in Nigeria, and it was there that he had married Doris Clatworthy, the daughter of a master butcher in Kent.

Eventually the family owned a sail-making business in Hamble which was the first to introduce terylene sails. Young Roger was an only child, and had a happy time attending St Mary's College in the city, although he was not a Catholic.



Williams bought a farm in later life

He wanted to go into the Navy, but his formidable mother had other ideas; medicine was an acceptable alternative, and like many doctors he could trace his interest in the subject back to a childhood experience in hospital – in his case diphtheria at the age of 13. He had just turned 17 when he began his medical training at the London Hospital, where he qualified in 1953 at the age of 21.

Following junior appointments at the London he was called up for National Service, and was posted to the Queen Alexandra Military Hospital at Millbank on the Thames, where Roger Bannister was a contemporary.

The ambitious Williams was focused on a teaching hospital career and recognised the importance of research and publication. “Publish or perish” was his maxim, and he went on to produce a remarkable 2,500 papers.

When he came across a patient suffering from haemochromatosis – deposits of excess iron in the liver – his interest in liver disease was kindled, and he settled on the new speciality of hepatology as a career. At the time Sheila Sherlock was the doyenne of liver disease, but her training post at the Hammersmith Hospital was already filled, so Williams took a two-year post

on the respiratory ward and completed research for an MD thesis on asbestosis.

Sheila Sherlock was appointed the first female Professor of Medicine at the Royal Free Hospital in north London and she invited Williams to join her there in 1959. Over the next six years he helped to establish the Royal Free as a centre of excellence for liver disease; in 1961 he went to New York on a Rockefeller Travelling Fellowship and worked with many of the leading experts in this new specialism.

Sheila Sherlock and Williams were both strong-willed and there was no room for two



With family members on the Solent

leaders at the Royal Free. They were always publicly polite to each other, but this belied a fierce rivalry, which did not abate when Williams set up his own unit in direct competition. “If I hadn’t had the Royal Free to compete with, maybe King’s wouldn’t have been so good,” he admitted.

After a spell in Southampton as a consultant physician, he returned to London determined to set up his own unit. He chose

an offer from King’s, and put together a multidisciplinary team in which general scientists, biochemists, physiologists, epidemiologists and bioengineers worked alongside doctors.

Joining forces with Roy Calne led to the first liver transplant, in 1968, and several more followed, Williams travelling up to Cambridge on an almost daily basis to provide medical support.

Preventing the body from rejecting the new organ was a sine qua non of transplantation, and Williams and his unit made particularly vital contributions to this aspect of the work; for patients with reversible liver failure his unit developed the technique of charcoal haemoperfusion, which took over the liver’s work until it had recovered.

In 1996, when Williams turned 65, his contract with King’s



With his family at Grange Opera

came to an end so he moved to the new Institute of Hepatology at University College Hospital – largely funded by the Foundation for Liver Research which he had set up in 1973.

In 2010 he was on the move again, when UCL transferred its hepatology work to the Royal Free, then finally, in 2014, Williams was invited to establish a new Institute of

Hepatology back at King's, which opened two years later. He remained a practising NHS consultant until he was 83.

A vice president of the Royal College of Physicians, in 2014 he began chairing a Lancet Standing Commission on Liver disease in the UK which has greatly influenced policy and practice.

Williams was accorded numerous honours, including a CBE in 1993, and 20 years later he was the first non-US national to receive a Distinguished Achievement Award from the American Association for the Study of Liver Diseases.

Regularly working 12 hours a day, he was an opera enthusiast, but his first love outside

medicine was sailing – all his boats were named Jos of Hamble in honour of his mother, who had bought him his first, “Jos” for where she had been married and “Hamble” for where she worked.

“The Prof”, as he was known, was a successful inshore racer, latterly in a J105. The Solent was his stamping ground – he was occasionally to be seen and heard combining his passions for sailing and opera, singing his favourite arias at the helm –

and for 50 years he rarely missed Cowes Week; he was a proud member of the Royal Yacht Squadron.

In later life he acquired a farm, to which he devoted as much time as he could. He was also an enthusiastic tennis player, and was on court with his coach when he collapsed a few weeks before his death.

Tall, elegant, and always immaculately dressed, Roger Williams was invariably polite and welcoming. He met his first

wife, Lindsay Elliott, at medical school; they married in 1954, and had three daughters, one of whom predeceased him, and two sons.

They divorced, and in 1978 he married Stephanie de Laszlo, granddaughter of the society portrait painter Philip de Laszlo; they had two daughters and a son. At his 80th birthday party he began his speech: “For someone who does not particularly like children I seem to have acquired quite a lot of them.”

**Roger Williams, born August 28 1931, died July 26 2020**