Alan Hall (1952-2015), an Englishman in New York

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Obituary

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Annette Self & Sandrine Etienne-Manneville[1]

Alan closing his departing speech at LMCB in 2006 by featuring his lab. Image by Ione Karney.

Alan Hall died of a heart attack during his regular Sunday morning jog on May 3rd in New York City, where he had lived with his wife Eileen. Alan's untimely and unexpected death happened just a couple of weeks before his 63rd birthday, which he would undoubtedly have celebrated with his two children and two young grandchildren. Before joining the Sloane Kettering Institute as chair of the cell biology program in 2006, most of Alan's career was spent in the UK. After graduating from Oxford, he stayed in town to start his PhD with Jeremy Knowles, but he received his first exposure to US science quite unintentionally when Jeremy announced he was relocating to Harvard after two months. Over his four years in Harvard, Alan perfected his training in biochemistry. He then did a two-year postdoc with Charles Weissmann (University of Zurich) where he developed his molecular biology skills and helped clone interferon. It was only after joining the Institute of Cancer Research (ICR) back in London that he entered the field of cell biology where he became a pioneer in the understanding of cytoskeletal regulation and cell motility. He worked quickly and accurately when at the bench. In the days before computer-aided research, it was always astounding to see how quickly he could read and interpret DNA sequences and remember the buffers and conditions required for the multitude of restriction enzymes—a wonderful resource even after the arrival of computers.

One of us (AS) joined Alan's lab as his research assistant in 1986 and remained for over 20 years to run his lab. When he set up in 1986, Alan's lab space was tiny—his office was no bigger than a cupboard and it was a squeeze to get two people in. Over the seven years at ICR, they moved labs twice, the lab space getting bigger each time as the number of lab members grew, until Alan finally settled at the MRC's new LMCB (part of UCL in London) in 1993, graduating to director in 2000.

During the 20 years in London, many scientists passed through the lab. Alan had the uncanny ability to take on really nice people who fitted in and worked well with the team, both in and outside the lab. Together with Anne Ridley, who joined his lab in 1990 as a postdoc, Alan published landmark papers describing how Rho GTPases controlled actin organization. This seminal work paved the way to a wide field of research demonstrating the impact of extracellular factors on cell morphology and motility. Under Alan's supervision, Laura Machesky, Kate Nobes, Mike Olson, Nathalie Lamarche, and many others contributed to the characterization of signaling cascades upstream and downstream of Rho GTPases.

Alan always had so much encouragement for colleagues both in and outside his lab, particularly young scientists embarking on their PhDs, and it was his encouragement that convinced his lab manager (AS) to embark on a PhD. He always had an open-door policy; you could just knock on the open door of his office and he would make time to talk. No matter how badly a research project was going, one always came out feeling much better and full of new ideas.

Alan was open to all kind of projects as long as they were somehow related to Rho GTPases. He was thus very supportive when Emmanuelle Caron and one of us (SE-M) asked him whether they could develop projects to characterize the functions of Rho GTPases in phagocytosis, cell polarity, and migration. These studies led to several groundbreaking advances impacting immunology, developmental biology, and cancer biology. In his lab,

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all students and postdocs had their own independent projects, but all ideas and data were freely discussed in and outside the lab.

Alan had a great sense of humor and he did not take himself too seriously. Even though he was very practical at the bench, that did not appear to extend to his DIY ability at home. He once told us a story about how he was fixing some roof tiles at home. He had bought ready-mix mortar and was very proud that he had managed to do it himself—the fixed tiles looked great. However, a few days later when it rained, they all came crashing down. He had not noticed the sand and cement were in separate bags and had just fixed the tiles with wet sand.

Alan maintained a truly friendly atmosphere, which undoubtedly contributed to the success of the lab. Morning and afternoon tea breaks were compulsory at the LMCB, and Friday beer sessions were encouraged. For his 50th birthday, Alan invited the entire lab for afternoon tea at the Ritz. Although he did not manage to fit all of us into a stretch limo to arrive in style as originally planned, we felt as part of a large extended family.

We all share so many happy memories of Alan and our time as part of his lab, too many to mention. We will always remember his great sense of humor, his smile, his laugh, his warmth, his kindness and generosity, his enormous patience and encouragement, his two-fingered typing and his ability, annoyingly sometimes, to be able to clone anything he wanted to. We could not have worked with a nicer mentor. Words cannot describe how much we will miss him.

