

Remembering loved ones

Persuasive professor of radiation who caused a stir

Jack Simmons, 87

There are few who might disagree with a Nobel peace prizewinner. Yet over the years the physicist Jack Simmons and his PhD supervisor the nuclear physicist Joseph Rotblat had a sometimes tumultuous relationship, largely due to Jack's controversial views on radiation risks to humans. It was not until Jack attended a conference in the US some years later that he found another physicist who concurred with him.

His research led him to develop a new paradigm to quantify radiation effects and he questioned both the International Commission on Radiation Units and Measurements (ICRU) and the International Commission on Radiological Protection (ICRP) which had established the definition and measurement of radiation dose on physical principles. Jack thought it should be based on the biological effects of radiation at the DNA level, and that instruments to measure the bioeffects should be developed.

In 1999 he published *Radiation Protection Dosimetry: A Radical Reappraisal* with a colleague. The book caused an upheaval in the radiation protection community, who fought Jack's new bio-effectiveness model to the teeth, stating that current radiation protection standards are based on epidemiological studies, mainly on

data from the Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bomb survivors. Last year the ICRU and the ICRP published an alternative approach to their definition of operational radiation protection quantities that went some of the way towards concurring with Jack's viewpoint.

Jack Simmons was born in 1934 in Highgate, north London. When he was four the family moved further down the same street, where he remained for the rest of his life. His father, Harry, came from three generations of antique dealers but had chosen to run a men's outfitters in nearby Crouch End.

With the Depression in the 1930s the shop went under and Harry found employment making replicas of military uniforms for the Hollywood film industry. Even so, the family were not well off and lived out of three rooms in the house, letting out the remainder to other families, often single parents.

Jack was an only child. His mother, Rosia (née Toronczyk), who was older than her husband by at least ten years, had been picked out by Jack's grandmother who came from the



Jack Simmons taught at the Polytechnic of Central London for almost 30 years. Left, with his stepdaughter Rosanne



same Polish town, Zychlin, and was looking for an arranged marriage.

Rosia arrived in Britain in the early 1930s and was later to lose most of her Polish family in the death camps. The effect on her mental health was so devastating that she went into a long-term depression.

At school Jack was one of ten who were awarded 11-plus scholarships by the London county council and he went on to board at Bancroft's School in east London. They were not easy years. Short of stature, Jewish and uninterested in sport, Jack was sidelined by most of his peers. He was set to take the Oxbridge exam but developed appendicitis, missed the deadline and in 1952 went instead to the newly established Atomic Energy Research Establishment at Harwell,

Oxfordshire, as one of its youngest scientists.

Studying part-time while working, he got into the Sir John Cass College, which became part of the City of London Polytechnic, to read physics. It led to an MSc and a PhD from St Bartholomew's Hospital's medical college. There Jack's interest was kindled in the application of physics to medical problems, especially the use of radiation, and he went on to complete a two-year postdoctoral fellowship at the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland.

There followed a spell at the Medical Research Council Radiation Unit at Hammersmith Hospital in west London, where he helped to put in place new electronic techniques, and a research position in Munich before he was asked to join the Polytechnic of Central London in

1970. He stayed until he retired in 1999.

In the early 1970s Jack had more or less a free rein to design his courses and he tailored them for those working in hospitals and medical school, such as paramedics and radiotherapists. In 1994 he was made a professor of radiation biophysics.

In a sabbatical year he went to Washington to work for the US Environmental Protection Agency. It coincided with the disaster at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in 1986. The telephone number of the office he shared with three colleagues was broadcast across the country and made available to anyone with concerns about the news. "All hell broke loose," he said of the following days.

Betraying a steely mind beneath a gently persuasive manner Jack was a forceful contributor at international conferences. A good listener, he also became a magistrate in 1981. He was on the committee of Supporters of Nuclear Energy and joined the call to build more nuclear power stations. It led to him joining the Worshipful Company of Fuellers.

A belief in social equality provided the bedrock to his actions and he was instrumental in founding the Association of Polytechnic Teachers in 1973 to improve pay and conditions. He served twice as its chairman.

In the late 1970s he sat on the same committee as Heather Egging, a humanities lecturer at Ulster polytechnic. She had been married and had a daughter, Rosanne. They wed in 1989 when Jack was 55. Every five years thereafter, Jack held a party to which the original guests were invited, along with new friends.

Generous towards charities, particularly those associated with his polytechnic's freemasons' lodge, where he was a member and Master, Jack helped to organise a weekend that raised £6,000 for the Williams Syndrome Foundation. He died nine days later. He leaves his wife, stepdaughter and three grandsons, one of whom has Williams Syndrome.

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