

Dr Herbert Barrie

Pioneer in the care of premature babies who developed new techniques for resuscitation and rewarded his team with champagne

In his early days as a paediatrician specialising in the care of premature babies, Herbert Barrie would reward his medical team with champagne whenever they had a survivor of a difficult neonatal ordeal. It was a measure of how often babies did not survive, largely because resuscitation techniques were so antiquated. One perinatal mortality survey carried out by the National Birthday Trust Fund in England, Wales and Scotland weighed especially heavily on Barrie's mind. It analysed 132 unsuccessful attempts to resuscitate babies weighing more than 1kg at birth.

Barrie observed that many babies could initially be resuscitated only to stop breathing again soon afterwards. The problem was how to go on ventilating them for hours, or even days at a time before mechanical ventilators had been invented. He started to conduct experiments. In his evidence to a 2001 Wellcome Trust seminar he recalled: "Fortunately we had an endless supply of immensely fit medical students at St Thomas's and we put them to work finger-ventilating babies, which they did willingly. After 24 hours we began to run into problems, not a lack of medical students, but one of humidification."

Barrie's interest in baby resuscitation brought him into contact with a number of leading figures in the field, including Ian Donald, an enthusiastic obstetrician in Glasgow. Donald had invented an electronic "finger", which he demonstrated to Barrie. This relieved the medical students of their role, and was also a prototype of what are today's baby ventilators.

On a trip to the US, Barrie was impressed with the work of Virginia Apgar, who was resuscitating babies with oxygen down a tube that was put into the baby's trachea. He wanted to bring her techniques to the UK, but was worried that using high pressures of oxygen could be damaging to newborn lungs. To counter this



"Herb" Barrie developed a valve to help resuscitate babies. Right, with his mother during the war

Barrie developed an underwater safety valve in the oxygen circuit. The tubes were originally made of rubber, but these were found to cause irritation to very sensitive newborn tracheas. Barrie therefore switched to plastic tubing which, because it was cut from a roll already, had the necessary degree of curvature built in. For many years a plastic tube based on his design was sold as "the St Thomas' tube".

Barrie was born Herbert Bihari in Berlin in 1927, the second son of Jewish parents. His father, Emil Bihari, was from Budapest and his mother, Ida, from Lwow in what is now Ukraine. Ida spoke three languages fluently and was full of sayings such as "think of good and good will come", which made the more cynical Emil "erupt into explosions of Hungarian invective".

As a child Herbert almost died from a bout of streptococcal septicaemia and, inspired by the care shown by his doctors, resolved to become a paediatrician like them. Growing up in Berlin he did not personally experience antisemitism. "I attended school normally," he later recalled. "My best friend was the daughter of a 'brown shirt', complete with jackboots, and we were in and out of each other's flats freely."

In 1936 the family fled Nazi Germany

and came to England, with Herbert being violently sick on the ferry crossing. His first impression was that England was "cold and wet". Emil continued his career as an electrical transformer designer. For the young Herbert, the family's move to a block of flats in Carshalton overlooking a tennis court started a lifelong passion for the sport. Tennis seemed to represent everything that was good about his adopted country. The German language, by contrast, seemed to represent everything that was bad about his country of birth and, though fluent as a nine-year-old, he never spoke it again after his move to England.

Herbert won a scholarship to Warrington County Grammar School. In the Blitz he and his brother were evacuated to Weston-super-Mare. After the war his father made inquiries about his family. His mother, brother, sister-in-law and niece had been murdered in concentration camps — along with Ida's parents, aunt, sister, brother, sister-in-law and two nieces. Understandably this news had a great impact on the young Herbert, who could not understand how a supposedly compassionate God could have allowed the Holocaust to happen; he became an atheist.

After school he went on to study

medicine at University College Hospital London. In his final year he decided to change his surname to Barrie. His interest in the fledgling speciality of paediatrics led him to Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children and then to St Thomas' Hospital.

He then spent a year as a research fellow in Boston, Massachusetts, where he became known as "Herb", before returning to St Thomas' to develop his

'I have two loves in my life, my wife is the first, tennis is the second'

work on resuscitation of newborns. He became a consultant and senior lecturer and, in 1963, was invited to write an article for *The Lancet*, which detailed the resuscitation programme being developed at St Thomas', even down to the equipment needed and the costs involved of less than £30 per day.

It was in the cohesive and tightly knit department at St Thomas' that he met Dinah Castle, a newly qualified doctor working in casualty. He eventually, in an uncharacteristically bold and impulsive gesture, bought two tickets to the Proms and asked her if she would like to



accompany him. Afterwards he took her for goulash at the Gay Hussar, his favourite Hungarian restaurant. Dinah became an eminent bacteriologist. She survives him with their two children, Caroline, who became a teacher's assistant, and Michael, a GP.

In 1966 Barrie moved to the new Charing Cross Hospital, which was in the process of transferring from the Strand. The senior paediatrician there was Hugh Jolly, a larger-than-life character. While they had differing views on issues such as breastfeeding, concepts of social and psychological paediatrics and circumcision, this did not prevent Barrie from developing an innovative neonatal unit. The hospital trustees provided money for a small laboratory, the Special Care Baby Unit, where Barrie, as head of the department of child health, was able to continue his research into the newborn. Above the bank of incubators there he hung a porcelain tondo of the Virgin and child.

Another of his innovations was a neonatal ambulance. He had worked out that statistically a premature baby's chances of survival were dramatically

increased if it was born at Charing Cross, so he came up with a policy of accepting referrals from other hospitals and introduced a customised ambulance, complete with an incubator and a ventilator, that could bring premature babies direct to his unit.

In the 1980s reorganisation of London hospitals led to the development of the Chelsea and Westminster Hospital and Barrie foresaw a struggle as to who would lead the new merged departments. He resigned from the NHS in 1986, but continued for many years in private practice, medico-legal work, teaching and sitting on the Vaccine Damage Tribunal.

A short, dapper, bespectacled and softly spoken man, Barrie listed one of his recreations in *Who's Who* as "wishful thinking". He always drove a smart car, dressed in a three-piece suit with a club tie and had the appearance of an archetypal English gentleman, but was a reserved man. He continued with tennis, playing doubles until his mid eighties. Although he would have an occasional drink he preferred soft drinks and after a tennis match, while his team-mates drank pints, he could make a Diet Coke last all night. His social life evolved around tennis and he once said: "I have two loves in my life, my wife is the first, tennis is the second."

Nick Goddard, his tennis partner and fellow doctor, recalled his playful side, the wit of his emails, his love of invent-

ing gadgets and his keenness to play the violin, not always well. "But when it came to tennis he would always play to win. When he put a ball away a steely smile would appear on his face as if to say, 'I may be old, but I got you that time, you bastard.'"

As for his other tastes, he dismissed anything that came after Elgar as "pop", and would walk out of any shop playing it. He was old-fashioned in his views, but also full of contradictions, and gifted when it came to provoking an argument. He

frowned upon natural childbirth, for example, arguing that it wasn't in tune with the times for a mother to have a painful labour. He would routinely accuse the medical profession of crying wolf over its "ludicrous" whooping cough campaign. "Why all the fuss about a dozen possible mismanaged whooping cough deaths, when we have an annual toll of 1,500 cot deaths, 2,000 child deaths from accidents, and 2,500 avoidable perinatal deaths?" he asked. Colleagues described him as "a contrarian" and "difficult to know".

Endearingly, for all his intellectual rigour, Barrie harboured quaint beliefs in homespun remedies, such as giving anxious children humbugs as treats instead of psychiatric treatment, stopping nosebleeds by getting the patient to bite on a cork, and rubbing brandy on the gums of teething babies.

Dr Herbert Barrie, consultant paediatrician, was born on October 9, 1927. He died on March 20, 2017, aged 89