

OBITUARY

David Cox, a counsellor of geneticists

GertJan B van Ommen¹

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Photo Thijs Roimans

On 21 January this year, David Cox, 66, MD, PhD, a world-renowned academic, founder of two companies, Mercator Genetics and Perlegen Sciences, and senior vice president with Pfizer since 2008, suddenly passed away. He went like he was: happy, optimistic, and on a journey. He dozed off on the shuttlebus to the hotel and just never woke up. He leaves a big gap in the lives of his family of four and the countless friends and colleagues who had the privilege to know him, work with him, and regularly get his visionary, unorthodox counsel.

David wasn't a cheer leader of large consortia, someone who would move an army to tackle a complex biological problem by increasing the workforce. Rather, he would work out a clever approach which might get you there by an unorthodox but valid method, and get going with a few colleagues. He was the developer of 'radiation hybrid' mapping, yielding one of the earliest, high-resolution physical maps of the human genome.¹ And later he co-founded Perlegen Sciences, which, using the Affymetrix chip technology, and in parallel to much larger and far more heavily funded academic efforts, generated a high-resolution genetic map of three world populations.²

He had an almost uncanny view around the corner of current developments in human genetics, and passionately stimulated colleagues in academia and companies, investors, and governmental

agencies around the world in doing something about improving the life of patients and caregivers. He projected this vision clearly and engagingly, in seminars, advisory boards, and personal discussions in the bar or at a dinner table. He made us achieve the impossible by a simple 'Don't worry, it'll be OK'. On the other hand, in committee meetings he could be brutally candid about pitfalls, and he could graciously annihilate scientific posturing at conferences. In his inimitable David Cox way, walking up to the microphone and friendly summarizing in under ten words the stretch of the claim. His funny outspokenness was very refreshing. To a packed room at a public session of an ASHG meeting in his beloved home town San Francisco, he once discussed the genetic gender testing in sports, and the personal grief the new genetics sometimes brought. 'Finally', he ended, 'they went back to doing it how it worked so well before—by just looking at them'.

David was a true world-citizen, at home in Europe, Asia, and the Americas. Travelling and lecturing, sitting on HUGO Council or other committees, he has crucially contributed to shaping the human genome project and today's large-scale genetics and biobanking. Aiming at advancing science as well as the social fabric, he was passionate about the value and vulnerability of the worlds' cultural differences, as well as about the need for public-private partnerships. In an interview in 2010, he said, 'Call me a dreamer, but I think if you look at the people who participate in trials, or contribute to population or clinical biobanks, what they ultimately want, the reason they participate, is an altruistic one: they want to help improve society by providing the materials and data that will help scientists and companies to improve the quality of peoples' lives' (http://bbmri.nl/images/stories/hub2_web.pdf).

We will sorely miss him. Starting as a paediatrician/genetic counsellor, he became a counsellor of geneticists. We gratefully acknowledge his teachings. The best way to fulfil the debt we owe him for his lifelong efforts is to continue what he has set in motion: academia, industry, the patient community, and the public at large joining forces to improve biological insights to make better treatments.

1 Olivier M, Aggarwal A, Allen J *et al*: A high-resolution radiation hybrid map of the human genome draft sequence. *Science* 2001; **291**: 1298–1302.

2 Hinds DA, Stuve LL, Nilsen GB *et al*: Whole-genome patterns of common DNA variation in three human populations. *Science* 2005; **307**: 1072–1079.