



Clinical Research

Richard L. Atkinson, MD, FTOS, retires as Editor-In-Chief

N. V. Dhurandhar¹ · L. D. Whigham² · I. Macdonald³

Received: 14 January 2021 / Revised: 18 January 2021 / Accepted: 19 January 2021 / Published online: 8 February 2021
© The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature Limited 2021

As Editors-in-Chief, Drs. Richard L. Atkinson and Ian Macdonald have provided strong leadership to the International Journal of Obesity (IJO) for the past two decades. On December 31st, 2020, Dr. Atkinson retired from his position as Editor-in-Chief of IJO after 21 years of impactful service. Here is a brief tribute to the long and illustrious career of Dr. Atkinson and his contributions to the field of obesity.

A 1968 graduate of the Medical College of Virginia, and a diplomate of both the American Board of Internal Medicine, Endocrinology and Metabolism, as well as the American Board of Nutrition, Dr. Atkinson's training institutions included Walter Reed General Hospital in Washington, DC and Harbor General Hospital in Los Angeles, CA. His career spanned across five decades and includes faculty positions at the University of Virginia School of Medicine, Charlottesville, VA; University of California at Davis, CA; Eastern Virginia Medical School, Norfolk, VA; and the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine, Madison, WI, where he was the Director of the Beers-Murphy Clinical Nutrition Center and Chief of the Section of Clinical Nutrition from 1993 to 2002.

Dr. Atkinson has been a leader in obesity research and treatment throughout his career. During this time, he founded multiple obesity clinics at several institutions. He is a past president of The Obesity Society, the American Society for Clinical Nutrition, and the American Obesity Association. The Obesity Society established the annual Atkinson-Stern Award for Distinguished Public Service to honor his service, in the field of obesity. Along with colleague Judith Stern, he was the first recipient of the award. Dr. Atkinson was greatly supportive of young investigators throughout his career. He helped establish the current

format of the Young Investigator Competitions of The Obesity Society in 1989 (now the Ethan Sims Competition), the American Society of Clinical Nutrition in 1994 (now the Nutrition Society Graduate Student Research Award Competition) and the International Congress of Obesity New Investigator Competition in 2002.

Dr. Atkinson served on numerous study sections and committees for the National Institutes of Health, National Academy of Sciences, and other federal and non-federal organizations. He also had a very vibrant and strongly funded research program that resulted in well over 200 peer-reviewed publications and several patents.

However, these standard measures of high academic success do not adequately describe Dr. Atkinson's contributions. The most impactful thing about his body of work is how it contributed to establishing obesity as a disease rather than a lifestyle choice or moral failing. He did this in various ways. Although a physician by training, his research spanned across basic science, animal studies, and human trials. While he is credited with several discoveries, he made particularly valuable conceptual contributions in the area of animal models of surgery for weight loss, the role of adenovirus infection in obesity, and pharmacological treatment of obesity.

Using rodent models, Atkinson et al. modified a surgical procedure, in which 10 cm segment of terminal ileum was transposed to the upper jejunum. This surgical manipulation during the early days of obesity surgery [1] suggested that the resulting weight loss is not due to malabsorption, but may involve stimulus to energy expenditure [2]. Later, he added vagotomy to the model with enhanced benefits. He hypothesized that the transposed terminal ileum is exposed to food at a different stage of digestion than what it usually encounters, leading to him being one of the early investigators to suspect a circulating factor that induces weight loss.

In the 1990s, his attention was drawn to infectious causes of obesity, and he devoted the next 20 years to describing various aspects of obesity induced by human adenovirus-36. His contributions led to a newly recognized field of study in obesity, termed Infectobesity [3]. The concept that microbes may contribute to some forms of obesity

✉ N. V. Dhurandhar
nikhil.dhurandhar@ttu.edu

¹ Nutritional Sciences, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX, USA

² University of Texas Health Science Center, Houston, TX, USA

³ Nottingham University Medical School, Nottingham, UK

contributes significantly to the argument that obesity is a chronic disease instead of viewing it as a moral failure.

Perhaps, the most emphatic and impactful work of Dr. Atkinson has been in the quest for meaningful treatment of the disease obesity. In his communications, Dr. Atkinson has been a passionate and early supporter of pharmacological approaches for effective obesity treatment [4, 5]. He perceptively recognized that while anti-obesity drugs are not a substitute for lifestyle modification, they supplement the efforts of individuals with obesity by empowering them to adhere to weight loss diets. He took it upon himself to support this cause by providing training to health care providers about weight loss treatment and by reaching out to people with obesity by establishing the American Obesity Association, an advocacy organization.

In addition to being Editor-in-Chief for *IJO*, Dr. Atkinson was founding Editor-in-Chief for another Springer Nature journal, *Nutrition & Diabetes*, for 6 years. The following are brief professional as well as personal perspectives provided by individuals who worked closely with Dr. Atkinson during his years with *IJO* and *Nutrition & Diabetes*.

Dr. Ian Macdonald: I was joint Editor of *IJO*, with Mike Stock as Editor-in-Chief, when we persuaded Dick Atkinson to join us as my co-Editor. Mike stepped down completely soon afterwards and Dick and I became Editors in Chief, which we managed to maintain for 21 years. As indicated above, Dick has many strengths and achievements but one of the most enduring aspects of his commitment to the scientific and clinical aspects of obesity has been the encouragement he gives to new investigators. This can only be good for the topic in the future as highly talented scientists and clinicians continue to be attracted to the topic, and thankfully to the *IJO*. Dick has also been very enthusiastic in his promotion of the *IJO* and in attracting Editorial Board members from most regions of the world, as well as stimulating the development of new aspects of the journal. I would like to think that we have succeeded in educating Dick in English spelling and grammar and the use of SI units as befits an international journal, but this is not always successful. I think we have ended up agreeing to disagree about how certain words should be spelt, and that mg/dl is not an appropriate unit of measurement of blood glucose. The main message for Dick as he retires from his Editor-in-Chief role is that it has been an honour and pleasure to have worked with him on the journal for more than 20 years, and also to spend some time together on the golf course. It is notable that the house he and Susan have just bought in Florida is surrounded by two golf courses. I look forward to visiting the Atkinsons later this year, when travel is permitted and safe, and giving them an update on the way *IJO* is progressing and also take the opportunity to enjoy losing a few golf balls.

Dr. Nik Dhurandhar: As I step down as Editor-in-Chief of *Nutrition & Diabetes* and take on the position of Editor-in-Chief of the *IJO*, the first recognition is about the big shoes to fill. In my 25 years of association with Dr. Atkinson, I have observed and learned much from him. Two key attributes that set apart this compassionate and thoughtful researcher are uninhibited imagination and uninhibited expression of scientific opinions. Daring to imagine, however, unconventional, has served him well in being a truly out of the box creative thinker. This is well complemented by the ability to communicate with conviction. On a personal note, I have a suspicion that his thinking, which is often ahead of his time, and the candor in expressing those thoughts cost him a chance to be the Surgeon General of the United States (he was a finalist for the job a while ago). Nonetheless, obesity research is much enriched due to his provocatively creative thoughts and influential presence.

Dr. Leah Whigham: I have had the honor and pleasure of working with Dr. Atkinson at *Nutrition & Diabetes* since it was first established in 2010. Dr. Atkinson invited me to serve on the first editorial board for the journal. I then moved on to serve as the Associate Editor and now Editor-in-Chief of the journal. I learned much from him about the importance of high standards in the publishing world and how to establish a new journal in a competitive field. Essential for any strong journal—indeed, for the effectiveness of any scientific field—is the peer review process. I observed Dr. Atkinson develop a strong editorial board and an extended network of scientists from around the world who will commit their time and expertise to this fundamental aspect of the scientific process. Even for a fledgling open access journal that receives revenue from manuscript publications, his approach to grow manuscript submissions and impact, without compromising publication quality was wholeheartedly supported by journal publishers. He creatively made use of the success of *IJO*, which had reached a point where many high-quality manuscripts could not be accommodated because of space limitations, by offering an automatic transfer option that simplified the resubmission process for authors and streamlined the review process. Through his leadership, and the subsequent leadership of Dr. Dhurandhar, *Nutrition & Diabetes* has now reached an impact factor of 4.4.

IJO has immensely benefited from the vision and leadership of Dr. Atkinson. During his tenure, *IJO* saw a rise in Impact Factor from 2 to over 5, and experienced significant annual growth in submissions, now receiving almost 1500 manuscripts per year. With submissions from all continents, and a dedicated editorial board consisting of members from 22 countries, *IJO* has truly become an international journal. Drs. Atkinson and Macdonald brought greater standards for scientific rigor to the journal including an emphasis on distinguishing between causation and correlation and adequacy of study duration needed for weight loss studies.

They have elevated the level of science published by the IJO and in turn, its contribution to the field of obesity. The team of Drs. Atkinson and Macdonald has established a vision for the journal, rooted in quality and rigor, that has led to the IJO now being the top-ranked original research journal in the field of obesity.

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Publisher's note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

References

1. Chen DC, Stern JS, Atkinson RL. Effects of ileal transposition on food intake, dietary preference, and weight gain in Zucker obese rats. *Am J Physiol.* 1990;258:R269–73.
2. Boozer CN, Choban PS, Atkinson RL. Ileal transposition surgery attenuates the increased efficiency of weight gain on a high-fat diet. *Int J Obes.* 1990;14:869–78.
3. Dhurandhar NV. Infectoobesity: obesity of infectious origin. *J Nutr.* 2001;131:2794S–7S.
4. Atkinson RL, Blank RC, Schumacher D, Dhurandhar NV, Ritch DL. Long-term drug treatment of obesity in a private practice setting. *Obes Res.* 1997;5:578–86.
5. Spitz AF, Schumacher D, Blank RC, Dhurandhar NV, Atkinson RL. Long-term pharmacologic treatment of morbid obesity in a community practice. *Endocr Pract.* 1997;3:269–75.