



Sir Roger Bannister (1929–2018)

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Sir Roger Bannister who died on 3 March 2018 is best recognised as the athlete who broke the 4 min mile on 6th May 1954 whilst a junior doctor at St Mary's hospital. He has been honoured as an inspiration to athletes throughout the world for some 64 years for breaking the record. He retired from competitive running shortly after this at the age of 25, however, he considered that his contribution to medicine was far greater than his ability to move his legs faster than others. He specialised in neurology and devoted himself to the study of the autonomic nervous system. He became profoundly interested in all aspects of the pathophysiology and care of patients with spinal injuries and it is to this subject that I would like to draw the attention of the readers of spinal cord.

He had been involved in the research whilst an undergraduate at Oxford University, serving as a subject himself. Later, when he qualified as a doctor and was serving in Aden, during his national service, he carried out research on heat stroke. Upon demobilisation, he decided to pursue a career in neurology and became a consultant at St Mary's hospital. There, he set up a research team to investigate the autonomic function. At that time, I was carrying out research at Stoke Mandeville Hospital on the role of the spinal cord in tetraplegic patients in controlling the autonomic system and he invited me to visit St Mary's so that I could lecture to his team, a stimulating and valuable experience.

He pursued his research work but upon his retirement, he edited a textbook on disorders of the autonomic nervous system entitled *Autonomic Failure*. The 5th edition which appeared in 2013 features a whole chapter entitled 'autonomic disturbances in spinal cord lesions' by CJ Matthias, DA Low and HL Frankel.

His devotion and enthusiasm for the clinical care of the patients with spinal cord injuries was evident from an early stage when he came to the Stoke Mandeville Games. Today, the subject of sport for disabled people attracts a worldwide television audience of millions and many tens of thousands at the Paralympic games but early on when the games were held on the lawns of Stoke Mandeville Hospital with only a handful of spectators, Roger Bannister came with his wife to support the event and present the prizes. (Fig. 1.) He gave an inspirational speech to the young athletes. This was a mark of his open-mindedness and enthusiasm to make others feel important and worthwhile.

Roger Bannister became chairman of the Sports Council in 1971. At that time, working as a consultant in spinal injuries at Stoke Mandeville Hospital, I was horrified at the number of young patients who had broken their necks playing rugby; I had over 100 under my care. This increase in the numbers was largely due to ill-considered change in the laws of the game. Roger took this issue on board and at meetings with neurologists encouraged me to speak and write papers on the subject. His influence assisted in a change in the laws. At that time, Sports Medicine was in its infancy and he again became the first president on the Sports Medicine Section, a new faculty at the Royal Society of Medicine. Upon his retirement, he encouraged me to become the subsequent president.

He maintained his friendship and when I wrote my textbook on the history of the treatment of spinal injuries, he willingly came out of retirement to write the foreword. In this very thoughtful two page analysis, he endorsed the value of sport for disabled people stating that:

'The most successful competed in the Para-Olympics which he (Ludwig Guttmann) devised and which eventually became a recognised and worthwhile part of the Olympic movement.'

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Fig. 1 Dr (later Sir) Roger Bannister presents a prize to the youngest competitor (Photograph taken from *Stoke Mandeville Road to the Paralympics* by Joan Scruton)

He endorsed Guttman's contribution:

'It is thanks to Guttman's refusal to accept defeat that thousands of paraplegics, instead of turning their faces to the wall, fought on and recovered hope for their future in fulfilled and useful lives.'

His enthusiasm, support and kindness show that he was not just a runner but, as he wished it himself, a great contributor to medicine.