

# The Life of RD Lawrence (1892-1968) - pioneering doctor and survivor of diabetes

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**Key words:** Survivor, pioneer, founder

Without the discovery of insulin, I would not be here today. My children would not have been born, indeed my father would never have come into existence and met my mother. I am only here because of the pioneering work of those many doctors that discovered the cause of diabetes and worked so hard to find its treatment in the form of insulin. How many millions of us are there who can trace our ancestry back to a person with T1DM? Four generations of Lawrence survivors now have those pioneers to thank for our lives. What adds to the tension of our story is the 'just in the nick of time' element and the manner in which my grandfather, RD Lawrence (RDL), was saved from his descent into death.

The real reason why so many of us remember him during this celebration of 100 years since the discovery of insulin is the work RDL went on to do following his medical resurrection, founding the British Diabetic Association and writing *The Diabetic Life*. My grandfather set the cornerstone for patient-centered Diabetes care in this country. The British Diabetic Association (now Diabetes UK) pioneered the patient-centered approach to managing care which we now see as standard across a huge range of medical conditions and illnesses.

My talk at the meeting followed on from Professor Alberti's presentation. He had traced the team of doctors responsible for the discovery of insulin, crediting previously overlooked work and highlighting some of the tensions and disagreements between the personnel. The story I told was based on my mother's biography of RDL, *Diabetes, Insulin and the Life of RD Lawrence* (Jane Lawrence 2012) and the slideshow that accompanies it. Some photos from the slideshow are included here. Sadly, she was not able to present but she was delighted with the report my son, Joseph and I brought back from the event, and she was also able to listen to the whole talk which the technical team at the Royal Society of Physicians had kindly recorded. To highlight the health aspect, I delivered the talk in sports kit as the House I am head of was competing in Sports Day later that afternoon and I needed to rush back to school to cheer them on!

Hugo Lawrence (born 1967) is the grandson of RD Lawrence

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*4 generations of Lawrences: Hugo Lawrence presenting Jane Lawrence's research on R.D. Lawrence. Photo by Joseph Lawrence*

Looking at his early life RDL (1892-1968) appears to have been a bit of a maverick but firmly rooted in his well-to-do Scottish family and with friends from Aberdeen Grammar School, the Gordon Highlanders and Aberdeen University. A gifted sportsman and angler, he was described as 'the most energetic man alive, high spirited and bubbling over with joie de vivre'. He was unable to enlist in the First World War due to an appendectomy and was devastated to lose most of his friends during the conflict as he convalesced, fighting the infections that failed to settle. He was posted to India for a spell and on his return in 1919, he started work at King's College Hospital with the ambition of becoming a surgeon. Tests following a further infection, caused by a chip of bone in the



*RDL at King's College Hospital in 1921, nine months after his diagnosis with diabetes. He is seated in the front row, third from the left, wearing spats.*



RDL and Dino Spranger

eye received during a post mortem, revealed diabetes. In 1919 this was a death sentence with a waiting time of three years and starvation as the most effective form of treatment.

He switched his studies to biochemistry and presented his thesis on diastase in the blood and urine in diabetes mellitus before heading off to Florence in 1922, to die in the warmth and beauty of Italy with his friend Dino Spranger, sparing his family the agony.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the world, the breakthrough happened in the lab of Collip, Banting and Best. We heard the story of the treatment of 14-year-old Leonard Thompson, the first patient to receive insulin, on the children's ward and the resultant raising of the near dead, of the entire ward of children. We imagined the joy and disbelief of the parents as they saw their children come back to life. We heard from Teddy Ryder whose thin and emaciated body was restored to health. He wrote to Dr Banting, 'I'm a fat boy now and I feel fine'.



Telegram from Dr Harrison; RDL on the way home from Italy

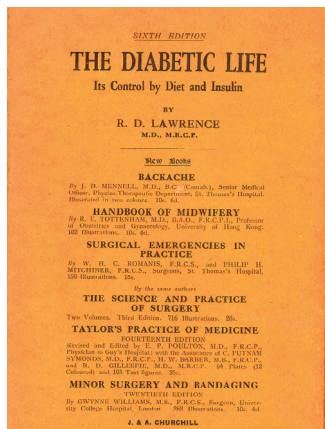
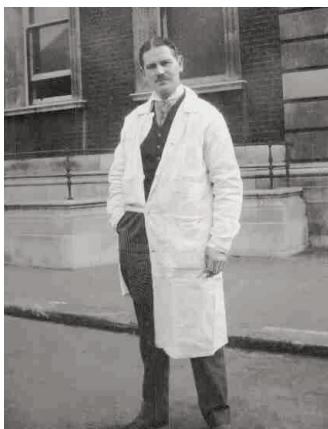
RDL had been managing his condition through diet for two years by this time and, despite the breakthrough of insulin in Canada, it was more than a year later when he received a telegram from one of his colleagues telling him to come home urgently as some insulin had finally arrived back home.

He found an Italian taxi driver who wanted to visit his son in England and they drove from Florence to London, with RDL having to take the wheel through Paris as the taxi driver was too frightened! Few if any of the roads were tarmacked and the cross-channel ferry used a winch to load the cars. He arrived 'more dead than alive but no pre-coma.' On 31st May 1923 Dr George Harrison and Dr RD Lawrence 'went to the fridge, took out a bottle of insulin, and we discussed in our ignorance what the dose should be. It was all experimental, for I didn't know a thing about it; and neither did he for he had only treated about three people. So we decided to have 20 units – a nice round figure.'

**Teddy Ryder's letter to Dr Banting; and his appearance before and after receiving insulin in 1922.**

He was restored to health with marvellous speed and began a career in which he shaped the clinical management of diabetes for over 40 years. He was the first to identify T2DM. He went from facing diabetic death to writing *The Diabetic Life*, teaching patients how to manage their condition. He had a 'demon passion for work and seldom did a day go by in which he did not perform an experiment on himself'.





In 1928 he married his wife Anna, of whom he said, 'I might so easily have gone through life without finding you'. They had three children and lived happily together in London.



Wedding of RDL to Anna Batson; RDL with his sons; his wife Anna.

He treated HG Wells, and together they founded the British Diabetic Association with the objective of supporting patients and reducing the stigma of the disease. They promoted a patient-centered approach and encouraged patients to take an active role in managing their condition. He wrote: 'Diabetes is not an illness any more than having flat feet is an illness. It is a permanent condition that has to be accepted and organized. If anyone from the diabetic establishment tries to persuade you that you have an illness, close your ears and go elsewhere for help and guidance.'

RDL and HG Wells on the cover of the 70th Anniversary Edition of 'Balance' the Diabetes UK Magazine (Formerly British Diabetic Association)



RDL working with 'These special children'

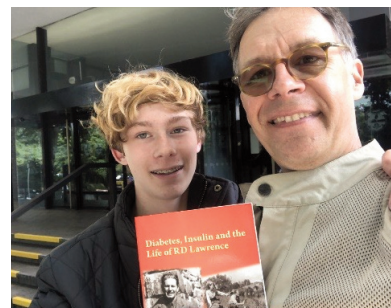
This was an era when negative labels abounded and people were defined by their disability with awful names such as spastic, mongol, incurable, remedial. He preferred 'people with diabetes' rather than diabetic and campaigned for children with diabetes, calling them 'these special children'.

Professor Harry Keen said of him: 'This was our founder. This was an internationally great figure. This was a physician of the old school who ushered in the new school. This was a physician-philosopher, a physician-liberator, a 'can do' physician. He pioneered bi-directional education in diabetes, developing the concept of the patient not as a consumer but as an essential co-producer of health care. His Diabetic Association was a major first step in the 'emancipation of the patient' – not just the patient with diabetes.'

He was made Honorary President of the International Diabetic Foundation and presented with a silver writing block inscribed with the words:

**Thank you for teaching us how to live in joy and happiness**

Participating in ABCD's 100 Years of Insulin conference was a proud moment for me and my family. Thank you for the opportunity to come and tell the story of my grandfather.



Joseph Lawrence (2007) and Hugo Lawrence (1967)



**Key messages**

- Hope
- Gratitude
- Diligence

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**Funding** None.

**For Information**  
Material for this talk was taken from *Diabetes, Insulin and the Life of RD Lawrence* by Jane Lawrence, published 2012.