

Suburb News *in conversation with...*

...Professor Sir Mark Pepys

“Medicine is a family business”

Professor Sir Mark Pepys and his wife, Dr Elizabeth Pepys (a retired haematologist and allergist) set up home in the Suburb a couple of years after they married in 1971. He was knighted in 2012 for his services to biomedicine and says his late father, Professor Jack Pepys, who died in 1996, was his seminal influence. His father was the world's leading allergist but Sir Mark, who trained as an immunologist and a physician, has specialised in amyloidosis for the past 40 years.

While still a PhD student at Cambridge he made fundamental observations in immunology and then during 30 years at the Royal Postgraduate Medical School he pioneered the clinical use of C-reactive protein (CRP) measurement which became a routine clinical test. It is used worldwide to detect and monitor inflammatory and tissue-damaging diseases and their response to treatment. At the same he developed his interest in amyloidosis, a relatively rare but very serious disease that causes 1/1000-1/1500 of all deaths in the UK. Amyloidosis is caused by the deposition of normally soluble proteins from the blood as abnormal insoluble fibres in the tissues. The amyloid deposits damage the structure and function of affected tissues and organs, leading eventually to death in most cases. Among his contributions to better management of the disease, Sir Mark invented a non-invasive method of diagnosis which has transformed understanding of the disease, enabling better

treatments, and underpinning his establishment of the UK NHS National Amyloidosis Centre at the Royal Free Hospital in 1999. Sir Mark subsequently invented and developed new approaches to treatment of amyloidosis which were licensed by GlaxoSmithKline and the most advanced of which is currently in clinical trial with encouraging results. Alzheimer's disease is also characterised by amyloid deposits, confined to the brain, and one of Sir Mark's drugs is about to enter a clinical trial funded by the National Institute for Health Research.

Mark Pepys' medical career began with a brilliant double first in Natural Sciences at Trinity College, Cambridge - and he had time to run cross-country for his University against Oxford. He then qualified as a doctor at University College Hospital Medical School, London (where he met his future wife in 1965 - they married in 1971), returning to Cambridge in 1970 to do his PhD which led to his election as a Fellow of Trinity College in 1973. At the same time they moved back to London to set up home on the Suburb where they brought up their two children who are married and now live abroad with their families. He is proud that his daughter, also a physician with an interest in the same field, is the third generation of doctors both on his own and Elizabeth's side of the family.

In 1999 Mark Pepys moved to the Royal Free Hospital in

NW3 as Professor of Medicine at UCL, occupying a splendid £9 million building constructed to accommodate his Department. The world leading National Amyloidosis Centre was established at the same time and now has a 60 strong multi-disciplinary staff seeing over 3,500 amyloidosis patients annually. It is funded directly by the Department of Health to provide diagnostic and management advice services to all amyloidosis patients in the country.

In September 2011 he retired as Professor of Medicine and became the first Director of the UCL Wolfson Drug Discovery Unit, newly established with generous support from the Wolfson Foundation. He continues to direct the research and development of the various drugs and treatments he has invented and which are progressively making their way from the laboratory into clinical trials and thus towards availability for patients generally.

Clearly, a very busy and dedicated professional, I asked Mark Pepys, who has just turned 70, what he did for 'fun'. Although he has reluctantly had to give up surfing in Hawaii where he and his wife have spent time in winter annually for the past 23 years, he remains a very keen skier (setting aside several weeks each year to ski in different places) and he enjoys dancing, film, theatre, music and social events - and walking in the Suburb. He was horrified at the suggestion he might want to wind down a little. "I'm very fit," he protests!



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862 Finchley Road, Hampstead Garden Suburb, London NW11 6AB
8455 1066 · mail@hgstrust.org · www.hgstrust.org