Performing Arts Medicine lost a great practitioner, friend, and advocate last month with the death of Dr Christopher Wynn Parry. Kit, as he was known to countless friends and colleagues, grew up strongly influenced by his maternal grandfather, the eminent surgeon Lord Moynihan. After Eton and Oxford, his chosen career path into surgery was interrupted by TB from which he made a slow recovery and was subsequently advised not to continue with rigorous surgical training. He opted for the medical specialty of rheumatology but soon fell under the influence of Sir Herbert Seddon, Professor of Orthopaedic Surgery at Oxford, who was researching, with the help of the Medical Research Council, nerve injuries, their treatment and prognosis, and the most troublesome neuropathic pain. He was proud to be one of “Seddon’s Boys,” the others being young surgeons, many of whom would become eminent in hand surgery and with whom Kit remained professionally close.

After Oxford, Kit took his skills and knowledge into the RAF, where he became Director of Rehabilitation at the combined services rehabilitation centres at Chessington and Headley Court. He established specialised services for neuro-rehabilitation and peripheral nerve injuries which, with Kit’s enthusiasm and skill and with the large number of injured soldiers providing clinical experience, soon became nationally and internationally renowned. He was also an early researcher into EMG as a diagnostic tool. The results of this work were summarised in Rehabilitation of the Hand, published in 1958, which was the first such specialised text in English and which ran to three editions and three reprints. Another result of this work was the recognition of rehabilitation as a separate subspecialty and the development of the Diploma in Physical Medicine, which Kit established, subsequently training a generation of young doctors. All the while he worked closely with hand surgeons at the RAF Plastic Surgical Centre and at the Royal National Orthopaedic Hospital (RNOH).

Retiring from the RAF, he was persuaded to establish a centre for neuro-rehabilitation and peripheral nerve injuries at the RNOH. This became nationally and internationally renowned and continues today. A by-product of this work was Surgical Disorders of the Peripheral Nerves, co-written with professors Bonney and Birch, a book of which Kit was very proud.

On retiring from the NHS, he continued to work privately in rehabilitation in the Devonshire Hospital in London and the King Edward VII Hospital in Sussex, but he devoted an increasing amount of his considerable energy to his interest in musicians.

Kit was always interested in music. As a pupil at Eton (where a Dixieland jazz revival was taking place led by a fellow pupil Humphrey Lyttelton, who was to become Britain’s foremost jazz trumpeter), he sang in the choir but also played trombone in a jazz band. He continued choral singing in adulthood as a tenor in the Bach choir. His interest in musicians’ medical problems stemmed from Sunday soirees held by his friend and neighbour, the conductor Sir Charles Mackerras. At the conclusion of these gatherings, Kit was often besieged by the performers with their medical problems. He and Ian James, another like-minded doctor, realised the gap in care for such musicians, many of them with very limited financial resources, and in 1989 created BAPAM, a charity charged with providing medical advice and care to performers, which continues to this day.

He carefully monitored all those attending with upper extremity problems, ultimately publishing his findings and observations in over 1,000 cases. He noted that only 40% had a recognised “organic or structural lesion” and that many were suffering as much from misuse or a mismatch with the instrument—with tired, aching arms—as were suffering true overuse. He also noted the contribution to the performers’ physical problems made by psychological and emotional factors, not helped by job and financial insecurities and the demanding and sometimes destructive lifestyles of the performer. He was an eloquent speaker and took this message to music schools, cajoling pupils and their teachers to respect the physical nature of music-making and to avoid injury. He also highlighted the sometimes appalling conditions instrumentalists were exposed to and forced to work under, such as cramped orchestral pits and inadequate venues, suffering for their art and being thankful they had a paid gig. For this work, he was elected an honorary member of The Royal College of Music in 2011.

I had the privilege and good fortune to observe Kit in his RAF time at his upper limb neurological clinics and, over the last 20 years, to work with him at BAPAM and with many of his musician-patients. He encouraged us to develop an MSc in Performing Arts Medicine, and he was proud to give the inaugural lecture to the first cohort of students at University College London in 2011. We combined our clinical and surgical experiences in The Musician’s Hand which was published in 1997, which was, again, a first in the English language and of which he was duly proud. He states in the preface “an apology for this book from a physician and a surgeon is that we not only love music but believe it to be fundamental to civilised living” and this sums up Kit.

Many national and international honours were bestowed upon him, and he was particularly proud of being elected, as the only non-surgeon to have been so honoured, President of the British Society of Surgery of the Hand in 1982. He continued working until health problems forced him to reluctantly retire from BAPAM in 2014. We shall miss him.

IAN WINSUPR
London, 7 April 2015

MPPA June 2015; 30(2):123.