Richard Gray (1949-2023)

Oxford, 10 November

Yesterday, Richard Gray died suddenly and unexpectedly. He and Beatrice had just moved to Brighton to be near her grandchildren, but Richard was continuing to play a full part in the Early Breast Cancer Trialists' Collaborative Group meta-analyses of all the randomised trials in the world, as he had done ever since EBCTCG began in 1985. He began work when CTSU started in 1975, helping with the 20-year and 40-year follow-up of Richard Doll's prospective study of smoking and death in British doctors, and was pleased with the results of the 70-year follow-up that Hongchao Pan and Richard Peto are now finalising.

Rory Collins said:
"Working with Richard Gray, as I did closely during the early days of the breast cancer meta-analyses, could be insanely intense, insanely demanding, insanely last-minute, and often insane fun. But, out of all of that insanity, emerged the most extraordinary sanity about how to treat women with breast cancer better, leading to substantial improvements in long-term survival that are still continuing. Richard was absolutely committed to getting the data straight and the analyses right. Many women are alive today as a result.

“Looking back, I keep remembering how annoyingly obsessive he was in insisting on going through the minutiae of the data in every trial in a way that was clearly futile … until, in lots of cases, he proved it wasn’t! The 1985 meeting of hundreds of doctors in Washington where the EBCTCG meta-analyses changed, and substantially improved, national treatment guidelines involved so many last-minute changes that it was, in Richard Gray’s own words, like being in the old *Blues Brothers* film. I learnt so much from him about the need to be obsessive about getting stuff right … and am only just recovering from it!”

Richard Peto said:
“RG was good at medical statistics and better than me at bar football, pool, bridge, and chess, but may have been the only Oxford physics graduate who refused to accept the consistency of Special Relativity.”