



David Mason

Pioneer in the application of monoclonal antibodies to diagnosis of cancer.

He was born in Sutton, UK, on Nov 30, 1941, and died in Oxford, UK, on Feb 2, 2008, after complications of surgery, aged 67 years.

David Mason's career was characterised not by fiercely competing with other groups, as is so often the case in science, but in creating a niche in the production of monoclonal antibodies that made his work incredibly valuable to others. He was a pioneer in the application of monoclonal antibodies to diagnostic sections, taking an early lead in the production of these compounds and pushing for their clinical adoption throughout his career. "His work fitted in very well with other collaborators, and it was a useful thing for the scientific community to have such excellent quality antibodies to use", explains Margaret Jones, a long-time colleague who worked with Mason in his Oxford laboratory for two decades. "David's work was a real asset."

Based at the John Radcliffe Hospital, Oxford University, UK, where he also did his medical training in the early 1960s and subsequent research degree, Mason's focus through much of his career was the production of antibodies that could distinguish between different types of lymphoma, and therefore guide treatment decisions. "If people present with a lump in the neck you have to deduce whether it is carcinoma or lymphoma because the treatments are very different", explains Jones. "David's work produced antibodies that recognised proteins on the surface of cells that saved patients from pointless surgery

by showing which tumours were inoperable lymphomas", she says. His work on the identification of new markers improved diagnosis—particularly of a specific type of anaplastic lymphoma kinase (ALK)-positive lymphoma—and generated real clinical benefits for patients.

Mason was a great advocate of the power of careful observation. Looking down a microscope at a sample and diligently recording the results could reveal a lot, he believed. Jones says he was also committed not only to developing new techniques but also ensuring that they were pushed through into use in hospitals all over the world. He lobbied for the UK's National Health Service to adopt updated diagnostic techniques and encouraged other scientists to consider new ways of diagnosis, such as use of fluorescence in-situ hybridisation, always explaining his rationale clearly and countering objectors with tact.

Generosity, in terms of his time and expertise, were the hallmarks of Mason's approach to science. "He was an open-minded man. When he started a project, he never thought of the personal benefit. He always thought in terms of science for science's sake, not for personal prestige", says Teresa Marafioti, a haematopathologist at Oxford University, and Mason's wife and colleague who worked with him for the last 10 years of his life in efforts to characterise new intracellular signalling molecules. Mason was keen on supporting researchers whose own laboratories might not have the funds to explore new techniques themselves. According to Jones, when he met people at conferences who were interested in learning about his work, he would invite them to spend time at his Leukaemia Research Fund Immunodiagnostics Unit—sometimes subsidising them from his own grant money—to give them the opportunity to learn. Jones recalls visitors coming from every continent in the world. Mason carefully maintained this network of contacts. His conviction that science and its products should be shared openly meant that "David loved to share his antibodies with all his colleagues and he never used them as tools for having his name in publications, he considered his colleagues as partners of his research enterprise and not as competitors", says Marafioti. A fair and democratic boss, he treated others with compassion, according to his long-time personal assistant Bridget Watson.

Mason had broad interests outside the sciences. A gifted linguist, he spoke several languages, and had passions for history, literature, and cinema; he also took up a position as curator of art at Pembroke College, Oxford University. His sense of humour, formally recognised in an early career as a comedy sketch writer, ensured his lectures at scientific meetings were in great demand. "He was always smiling and was a unique man", says Marafioti. Mason is survived by his wife and four children from previous marriages.