



Robert Winston

By Suha Bachir, Imperial, & Kate Stein, BL

With his familiar moustache and reassuring voice, world-renowned fertility expert Lord Robert Winston is well known for his BBC television series, which include *The Human Body*, *Child of Our Time* and *Superhuman*. *Medical Student* reporter Suha Bachir went to the House of Lords to interview the man himself. Read on to discover Lord Winston's inspirations, his irritations, and why he thinks Imperial is the best medical school in the land.

Professor of Fertility Studies at Imperial College and head of the hugely successful IVF service at the Hammersmith Hospital, Lord Winston has become something of a national treasure. He has that unusual mix of serious intellect (he has over 300 scientific papers in peer-review journals to date) coupled with a brilliant capacity to communicate complex science to a wide public audience.

He was made a life peer in 1995 and speaks regularly in the House of Lords on education, science and medicine. Recently, he has spoken out in the press, controversially claiming that red tape is hindering British researchers from finding alternatives for patients in need of organ transplantation. Since approximately 500 people die every year in the UK whilst on waiting lists for transplant operations, it's understandable why he's frustrated.

When did you first discover your passion for science?

My interest in science started when I was 7 years old. I always thought it would be an interesting area to be involved in and I've more or less stuck with that view right through school and university. But my career initially was not in science, it was in medicine, which is a bit different.

Who helped and encouraged you the most throughout your career?

I think there were many people at different stages really. Inevitably you meet inspiring teachers who make a big difference. My A-level biology teacher was probably the most influential. At medical school it was more about the art and craft of the subject, rather than the science.

One of your research interests at the moment deals with modifying pigs' genes for potential human organ transplantation. How's that going?

The molecular biology is going well in that we can get our gene targeted fairly adequately. The difficulty though is the regulatory framework in being able to mate pigs that you have modified. I'm afraid the system in Britain needs changing. There is absolutely no cruelty to animals involved in the work we are doing, it should not have taken so much effort to get a small number of pigs through the frame. It's inevitable that this work will increasingly move to the US. In fact, we've just submitted a grant application to the NIH. I think it's sad for Britain that this should be the case.

Why the NIH?

Well it's the most prestigious and high profile clinical funding authority with billions of dollars. Also the US has a more robust attitude towards animal research, resulting in much improved human health. In this country we've got into a bad situation where many people, including the government, seem to assume that the animal activists are telling the truth regarding cruelty to animals in laboratories. This just isn't the case and I think it's had a very bad effect on public opinion.

What do you think are the main advantages and disadvantages of British research in comparison to research conducted in the US?

Britain is a heavy hitter in terms of the number of people in the population and the size of the country. Imperial college is one of the heaviest hitters of all. We are great at doing research, but not great at translating it which is an important issue.

Now that you have retired from clinical medicine do you miss it?

No, I have my research and I'm currently starting up a new charity at Imperial. I'm chair of the Royal College of Music and I have a number of other interests including my

media pursuits. I also do a huge amount of lecturing around the country.

What advice could you give to medical students who are interested in pursuing a clinician scientist sort of career?

Don't be put off by the current climate because it will get better. At the moment I'm afraid the whole issue of medical careers has been poorly handled by the government. I think there is massive depression as people reach qualification, don't you think?

What are the three most important qualities in a scientist?

Single mindedness, optimism and overall a passion in what you're doing. Notice I don't put down excellence or high intelligence because I don't think any of those are actually that important. In medicine you don't need high intellectual ability you need qualities of humanity.

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You have many passions ranging from playing the saxophone to directing plays, why do you do so much?

All I can say is one of my great beliefs is summed up by that phrase of Terrence (poet) "Homo sum: humani nil a me alienum puto 'nothing human is alien to me'. In fact, I think that is a good motto for any medical student. It's a brilliant description of doctoring and it reminds us that we're all human.

This one's for the Imperial readers, how great is working with imperial?

Imperial is a magnificent place. It's a great medical school, getting better all the time and very well led. I think Richard Sykes has been very good. It's an exciting, vibrant and challenging community which has to be seen as the best medical school in Europe as simply as that. I think it knocks spots of Oxford and Cambridge.