Harold Cummins (1894–1976)

Dr Harold Cummins, who died on 12 May 1976 aged 82, was for many years Professor of Anatomy at Tulane University School of Medicine, New Orleans, Louisiana, USA. It is reported that during the years he was on the staff he taught anatomy to more than 5000 medical students. He was well versed in human genetics, as well as being an authority on dermatoglyphics. This is exemplified by the fact that he was on the editorial boards of the *American Journal of Human Genetics* and the *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*, in addition to being on the board of the *American Journal of Anatomy*.

He had a world-wide reputation and was greatly respected. In particular, he was famous for the book on ridged skin, *Finger-prints, Palms and Soles*, which he wrote with the assistance of a colleague and which is usually referred to as 'Cummins and Midlo'. This book, first published in 1943, was reprinted (without change) as a paperback in 1961.

He was a 'Southerner' by adoption and not by birth. He was born in Kalamazoo, Michigan, in May 1894, studied at the University of Michigan and later went to Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee, as an instructor in anatomy. After that he went to Tulane University, where he obtained a Ph.D. in anatomy. His interest in the subject, for which he coined the name dermatoglyphics in 1926, was first aroused when he was dissecting the corpse of a large negro. The skin from one sole (including the toes) of this cadaver was carefully preserved between two sheets of glass and was shown to fortunate visitors to Dr Cummins' office at Tulane.

Although Dr Cummins gave the science of dermatoglyphics its name, he did not found it. He built on the foundations of others and willingly acknowledged his debt to previous investigators, in particular Francis Galton and H. H. Wilder. Scientific interest in ridged skin was first aroused in the later years of the 17th century. Nehemiah Grew described the pores, ridges, and arrangements on palms and fingers in 1684 and for the next 200 years further descriptions appeared in anatomical publications. It was left to Galton, in the later years of the 19th century, to put the subject now called dermatoglyphics on a sound scientific basis. Cum-

mins' researches covered all aspects of dermatoglyphics, as witnessed by his many published papers. His method of classification for configurations on palms and soles is the classic one. Many people consider that his greatest contribution to the subject was his discovery that patients with mongolism (Down's syndrome) showed characteristic dermatoglyphic features on palms and fingers. He was able to show that the peculiarities were of value in the diagnosis of mongolism. These findings not only gave a new impetus to the study of ridged skin, they were the foundation of clinical dermatoglyphics, which has proved valuable for a variety of purposes, especially in the study and diagnosis of malformations associated with abnormal chromosome complements.

Dr Cummins was one of the invited speakers at the first symposium on dermatoglyphics, organized by Dr D. C. Rife, which was held at the Second International Conference on Human Genetics in Rome in September 1961. During the course of the meeting Commissioner C. H. Vogelius Andersen, Director of the Danish Identification Bureau, stressed the need for an international organization to promote research in dermatoglyphics and to bring together workers in the various branches of the subject. The suggestion was warmly welcomed by all participants and Dr Cummins was enthusiastic. As a result, International Conferences on Dermatoglyphics was founded; the name being proposed by Harold Cummins, who was elected Honorary President. He still held this position when the organization was reformed and renamed International Dermatoglyphics Association in 1971 and he continued as Honorary President until his death.

His enthusiasm for dermatoglyphics and his kindly nature led him to encourage workers in all branches of the subject. Many he knew personally. On his retirement in 1964, he was made Emeritus Professor of Anatomy at Tulane University School of Medicine. He continued working and went to his office daily until his last illness.

Dr Cummins will be greatly missed but, both by his writings and his personal contacts, he has ensured the continued development of dermatoglyphics.

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