Interview with Neil Thomas by David Dejour

**DO** HOW DID YOU BECOME INTERESTED IN SPORTS MEDICINE/DEGENERATIVE JOINT/ARTHROSCOPY?

**NT** I have had an interest in sports all my life, having competed as an athlete at county level as a sprinter, and at the same level as a golfer, so I understand the physical demands and mental pressures upon competitors. When I got into medicine I found that I could communicate easily with sportsmen who were my patients, because I shared and thus understood their psychology.

**DO** WHAT WAS THE REASON FOR YOU TO START PERFORMING ARTHROSCOPY?

**NT** Most of my teachers in the early 70s told me arthroscopy was a “fad” and that it would not catch on as a lasting technique. I and others of my generation wanted to prove them wrong, so I went on the first knee arthroscopy course in the UK in 1979, and met David Dandy who was running it. Incidentally there were NO practical sessions then, it was all lectures! Then I practised with other European knee surgeons in the mid 80s (Jan Gillquist in Linköping, Henri Dejour in Lyon, Werner Müller in Basel, Marcel Lemaire and Vincent Chassaing in Paris and Roli Jacob in Berne) and eventually set up the first knee arthroscopy courses at the Royal College of Surgeons in London in 1993.

**DO** WHEN DID YOU START ARTHROSCOPY OF THE KNEE JOINT/OTHER JOINT?

**NT** In 1978, when it was common to do an arthroscopy first, and then open the joint to perform the surgery.

**DO** WHAT ABOUT YOUR INVOLVEMENT IN KNEE ARTHROPLASTY?

**NT** From the late 70s I was doing knee arthroplasty, and over the decades we gradually learnt how to do it better, namely by understanding the importance of gap-balancing, rotation of femoral and tibial components, patella-tracking, etc. The real jump in knowledge came in the 2000s, when companies realised the importance of the shape of prostheses, the importance of the design of instruments and the whole revision scenario. I started some research into knee kinematics with David Murray’s lab in Oxford and later with Andrew Amis at Imperial College, London, with whom I had earlier collaborated with in our ligament fixation work.

**DO** WHAT WERE THE MOST IMPORTANT STEPPING STONES IN YOUR CAREER?

**NT** Initially choosing orthopaedics. I had worked as a lab assistant for four months at the Bioengineering Department at the Royal National Orthopaedic hospital, Stanmore, under John Scales, before I went to medical school. I handled and measured metalwork and hip replacements and asked lots of questions! During medical school I was not really attracted to surgery, but that experience stayed with me.

Those of us who had some arthroscopic instruments, and the interest to use them, began experimenting on loose bodies and meniscal lesions, and later meniscal suture and ACL reconstruction. This was during my training, but it began in earnest after 1986, when I was appointed a Consultant with my own practice.
I did a definitive scientific project from 1979 to 1985, implanting prosthetic knee ligaments into animals as well as performing in laboratories at the Westminster Hospital and Queen Mary College in London and the Royal National Orthopaedic hospital at Stanmore (my old lab and now headed by Professor Scales). That research enabled me to present the results around the world, thus attending major meetings and meetings, all the main players in the field. I was exposed to and became “hooked” on knee surgery and that continued for the next 30 years.

**DD** CAN YOU TELL ME HOW YOU CAME TO ESSKA?

**NT** I attended the first ESSKA conference in Berlin in 1984 as an orthopaedic trainee with a small group from the UK, including Lordon Trickey from the Royal National Orthopaedic Hospital who at that time was ESSKA Vice-President. (He never served as President but had supervised my knee ligament project.) Over dinner at that conference he explained to us how important it felt it was to reach out and communicate with surgeons from other countries — particularly Europe as well as the United States, which was dominant at that time. It was a policy with which I agreed, and have tried to implement ever since.

**DD** HOW DID YOUR CAREER EVOLVE WITHIN ESSKA? DID THE ROLE AS PRESIDENT CHANGE YOUR LIFE OR YOUR VISION?

**NT** I was asked by David Dandy to meet the ESSKA Board when they visited London in 1997. At the last minute, David was unable to attend so I was met by Giancarlo Puddu, René Verdonk, Ejnar Eriksson and Carl Wirth who informed me that I was to be the local organiser of the 2000 ESSKA meeting in London. I started work immediately and then reported regularly to the ESSKA Board, attending their meetings etc. I had various small roles within the society but delivered the London meeting as chairman of the scientific committee and local organiser. In 2000, I was elected 2nd V-P of ESSKA. I was very involved with the Journal of Bone and Joint Surgery (Br) and brought some of this knowledge to was very involved with the Journal of Bone and Joint Surgery (Br) and brought some of this knowledge to ESSKA. In 2000, I was elected V-P of ESSKA. I took on the role of ESSKA President elect. In 2006, I was elected President of ESSKA. I must pay tribute to the continuing development and now excellence of the KSSTA journal with its two excellent editors, initially Ejnar Eriksson and now Jon Karlsson.

**DD** WHAT IS YOUR OPINION ON THE PLACE AND ROLE OF ESSKA IN THE WORLD OF SCIENTIFIC SOCIETIES?

**NT** I believe that ESSKA has come of age, not just as a European society but as an international society. It is second to none, representing European surgeons and is a world leader in terms of clinical and basic research and more recently teaching, especially in this Internet age. This takes the forms of the biennial conference at which can be found the most innovative scientific programme about knee-related topics in the world. Unlike the AAOS and ISAKOS meetings, which at times can be rather static, with “slated” formats where the delegates are “taught”, the ESSKA formats are usually more exciting and controversial, with opinion leaders from around the world going “toe-to-toe” with each other in genuine debate, in an attempt to extend the boundaries of “known” knowledge. These sessions, as well as those dealing with new technology, generate a massive interest, and act as a catalyst for both young and old in their next research projects, as well as updating their clinical practice.

**DD** WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO YOUNG ORTHOPAEDIC SURGEONS TODAY WHO STILL HAVE TO START THEIR CAREER?

**NT** Orthopaedics today is a much larger field overall than when I started. The explosion in technology and science has continued exponentially. I would advise a good general training and then, if it is possible, to pick out a sub-speciality and do a fellowship with a world leader. I would join both national and international specialist societies, and obtain some solid clinical experience viz. do not attempt to run before you can walk. To be successful you must enjoy what you do and have a work/life balance that suits you. Most orthopaedic surgeons I know “work hard and play hard” and they also have a very healthy sense of humour. Perhaps that personality trait is a “sine qua non” for our specialty? My own daughter has just been appointed an orthopaedic consultant, so I feel it is time to pass on the baton.

**DD** WHAT ARE YOU DOING NOW?

**NT** Every country has a different health system(s) so I cannot be didactic. I think it is important to make time for friends and family and also an outside interest or two, but when you are really busy professionally these can become squeezed very thin for a few years, and I know some surgeons who have paid a heavy price for concentrating too much on their work.

**DD** DO YOU HAVE PRIVATE PASSIONS, APART FROM YOUR PROFESSIONAL LIFE?

**NT** Yes, I collected wine for 40 years and am now rationalising my cellar. My wife and I do a lot of exercise every day (you can’t do that when you work). I bought a new guitar, play some music and also enjoy competitive bridge. We are planning regular trips abroad where you can “stop and smell the flowers”. I am very happy with this new life where I am “time rich and cash poor” compared to the old one!

**DD** ARE YOU GOING TO ESSKA MEETING?

**NT** Of course! I booked my flight to Barcelona before Christmas, ESSKA has been such a passion for me. So I will be there.

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Thank you so much, Neil. It’s been a pleasure, talking with you.