

Tony Napier

## **Ten lives that set the course of blood transfusion**

Out of the ancient fog of humours and Hippocratic medicine, through the pioneering insights of a few individuals, came what now seems to us an almost self evident understanding of physiology, the role of blood and its circulation. This knowledge allowed the emergence of transfusion as aid to safe surgery, trauma care and support for many haematological conditions. All this was made possible by massive public support for the concept of blood donation for the good of others and coordinated by publicly funded transfusion services. Blood composition was found to be highly complex and this complexity mirrored the specific needs of patients requiring, not blood as donors gave it, but only those constituents selected to remedy their specific needs. This knowledge triggered the need for industrialised processes to purify, package and distribute a human blood derived pharmacopeia which proved transformative in many medical conditions. Unfortunately the fact that in Britain and many other countries governments did not step in to adequately resource this need opened the door to commercial organisations. Under pressures to meet clinical needs at competitive prices led some companies to source blood cheaply by exploiting the desperation of “Skid Row” donors with little regard to their fitness, their suitability to donate and a blinkered view of the safety of the final product. Out of this has come a story of devastating transfusion transmitted infections for many patients and to one of the biggest ever health service malpractice failures. In some countries enormously expensive public enquiries, unfortunately many years after the events, have been undertaken to learn the necessary lessons but will this aspiration be realised?