

Article

Recollections of Nick Martin: 1983–1986

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Abstract

This short essay recounts the author's interactions with Nick Martin in the years they both worked with Lindon Eaves at Virginia Commonwealth University. Although coming from very different academic traditions, they became close colleagues building their young careers together. Nick generously shared his statistical genetics expertise and the author taught Nick a thing or two about psychiatric illness.

Keywords: Lindon Eaves; Virginia Commonwealth University; statistical genetics; psychiatric genetics

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Before I ever met Nick Martin, he had already had an important impact on my career. In 1982, I was a young biological psychiatrist trying to find my way, without outside help, through the wilds of basic statistical genetics. I was considering moving to a place where I could be taught the details and collaborate with real experts. I had visited Washington University St Louis, and the job offer they gave me was quite disappointing. I was lost about how to proceed.

At that time, I had been studying twins selected in the World War II U.S. Twin Registry and realized that mortality was considerably lower in the MZ than in the DZ twins. Nick had written on the impact of selection on twin correlations — which was at work in this registry as the military does not take recruits with significant medical problems. I wrote him a letter asking for his advice. He kindly wrote back explaining in some detail what I was after. At the end of the letter, he wrote something like 'If you have further questions on this, you might want to contact Lindon Eaves who recently moved to Virginia and so is a lot closer to you than I am. He probably understands all these issues better than I do'. As it so happened, Irv Gottesman had, just a few weeks prior, during my visit to Washington University, given me exactly the same advice — to contact Lindon and explore possible collaborations.

I took these two independent recommendations as something of a sign. I contacted Lindon. We arranged for a visit. I was so impressed with him that, against the advice of virtually all my colleagues and my own rather risk-averse personality, I decided to give up my career in biological psychiatric research and move with my young family to Richmond in the fall of 1983. Who was there to greet me but Nick, soon to be joined by Andrew Heath. Nick and Andrew had both been Lindon's graduate students at, respectively, the University of Birmingham and Oxford. For the next three years, on the 11th floor of Sanger Hall at MCV, when I was not seeing patients or running an in-patient psychiatric service, I sat at a small desk with Nick and Andrew both no less than 15 feet

away and Lindon in a near-by small office, always with the door open.

It was for me a magical time. Of the four of us, I was the odd man out. I was the only American, the only physician, the only one without much prior statistical training, and the only one not used to taking tea breaks twice a day. But that did not stop them from including me in all their activities — although I never learned to like British tea that much. The generosity of spirit showed to me by Nick (and Andrew and Lindon) then was such a gift for me. I was straining, given my own limited statistical background, to read the relevant literature and understand it — making only very slow and limited progress. And then, as if a tooth fairy had granted me my one wish, I was surrounded by the leading experts in the world who not only patiently answered my questions, but shared data with me, taught me how to run PRE-LIS and LISREL and then how to interpret the findings.

The first real quantitative analyses I ever did were on symptoms on anxiety and depression in Nick's Australian National Health and Medical Research Council Twin Register. It was our first paper together in the *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 'Symptoms of Anxiety and Depression in a Volunteer Twin Population: The Etiologic Role of Genetic and Environmental Factors' (Kendler et al., 1986). We then got very high-tech and fit multivariate models to that data for our follow-up paper, also in AGP: 'Symptoms of Anxiety and Symptoms of Depression. Same Genes, Different Environments' (Kendler et al., 1987). My desk was soon surrounded by piles of green and white stripped output that I would take home in the evening to study further.

It is no understatement to say that my career in psychiatric genetics was launched in those intense three years in my tutelage with Nick, Andrew and Lindon. Together, we planned for the interview study of psychiatric illness in the general population Virginia Twin Registry. I distinctly remember running up the stairs, having just received — in the mail — the NIH form which showed a very strong priority score on that first grant to fund our interview-based studies. Nick was the only one there. He gave me a broad shout-out and a hug. We were so excited. Nick provided a range of practical advice in how to start up the study and

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recommended for the job of project coordinator Patsy Waring, who proved extremely capable and helped get this very ambitious research project off the ground.

Nick had a natural enthusiasm as well as penchant toward iconoclasm. For example, we began then what has been a 40-year argument about the relative value of questionnaires versus psychiatric interviews. He had a wonderful guffawing laugh. His caring side took a bit more time to appreciate. I recall being stunned when I came in one day and he was organizing the papers on Lindon's desk, which was usually in a very cluttered state. I then learned that he did that regularly, without complaint. He was keeping Lindon organized as part of his job and assumed (quite correctly in my view) that he was thereby a critical contribution to the field.

Nick, Andrew, Lindon and I would often have lunch together at the Skull and Bones, where Nick was a great fan of the onion rings. Then, as now, I was a bit more attentive to my diet than Nick, and exercised regularly, which was not one of his predilections. That led to no end of teasing from him, but it was all quite good-natured. The conversation at those lunches was often scintillating. I had to scribble references down that I would try to read through in the next few days, often having to go to Nick to explain something

to me. But on occasion, the subject would turn from genetic modeling to psychiatric illness in which I could update them on advances in the literature, to which they were quite attentive.

I knew those days together were limited. Nick's urge to return to Australia was evident. Lindon and I tried in various ways to provide resources to convince him to stay. But that was not destined to be. Although we came from very different backgrounds, we bonded during those intense years together when we were each growing our careers. I have ever since always considered Nick a good friend as does my wife Susan and our older kids. He has given, in his generous spirit, so much to his field and to me personally. We are all in his debt.

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