

# FROM HAEMATOLOGY TO STAND-UP COMEDY

Dave Spikey may be a famous comic and actor now, but in the late sixties he was starting a biomedical science career.

“I did an event for a room full of clinical biochemists; it was an interesting gig. What I hadn't realised and I should have done is that you can't tell a clinical biochemist just one joke. You've got to tell them a

joke that's not very funny, a joke that's funny and a joke that's hilariously funny so they've got a low and high control – that's the only way it's going to work.”

Dave Spikey knows what he's talking about. Unusually for a stand-up comic he started his career as a biomedical scientist – joining Bolton Royal Infirmary in 1968 as a Junior Medical Laboratory Technician and rising up the ranks over a 30-year career to become Chief Biomedical Scientist in haematology at the Royal Bolton Hospital.

The year 2000 came and he found himself one Monday morning in a rainy, windswept Bolton carpark, dressed as a giant berry and singing the Katrina and the Waves classic *Walking on Sunshine*. He was filming an episode of Channel 4 sitcom *Phoenix Nights*, which marked his move into full-time comedy. But this didn't come overnight: he'd been doing stand-up and writing comedy in his spare time since 1987.

## Early years

Comedy has always been a huge part of Dave's life. “I remember an essay I wrote

about what I did on my holidays during primary school, and the teacher wrote, ‘Another good essay from David, but why does everything have to have a comedy element?’ I wasn't even aware I was doing that – it was just the way I was seeing life,” he says.

Dave was academic – he passed his 11-plus, went to grammar school and was sitting his A-levels with plans to become a doctor when his father (then a painter and decorator) had an accident and couldn't work; as the eldest child Dave needed to become breadwinner.

While in hospital, he saw a job advert for medical laboratory technicians and encouraged Dave to apply – suggesting it would stand him in good stead once he could resume his studies. “I went to the interview on the Friday from the comfort of my new home, the sixth-form common room, and found myself on the Monday morning in a white coat in a microbiology lab helping sample phlegm.”

## Starting out

Dave was one of seven basic-grade juniors who did the rounds in the hospital in microbiology, histopathology, biochemistry and haematology, while working towards their Ordinary National Certificate on day release. “I found my home in haematology – I thought it was the SAS of pathology. I aspired to be on call



at night and come in and help save lives,” he says. “I loved haematology.”

Dave progressed on to the Higher National Certificate and went on to do the two-year Special Examination leading to Fellowship. He got the senior post at the hospital following his viva for the Special exam. “I instigated a thalassaemia and haemoglobinopathy screening programme for our population in Bolton and introduced all the techniques for that.”

## Career success

He also improved other areas of the laboratory. “We were a very basic lab. Haematology was really expanding back in the mid-1970s and we were getting left behind. There was an old-fashioned attitude of sending everything to be tested at Manchester Royal Infirmary. We thought: ‘No, we can do it here.’ I introduced cytochemistry techniques – PAS, Sudan Black, etc – I got all that started. Those areas I am immensely proud of, mainly

because I instigated them,” he adds.

The career didn't come without its challenges, and the biggest in his early days in microbiology was having to kill mice and guinea pigs that had been tested on, then dissect them. “I was so inept at it that it's a whole comedy sketch right there – I feel guilty even joking about it,” he says. “I've always been a massive animal lover and I refused to do it in the end. I was threatened with the sack, but I didn't lose my job.”

## Move to comedy

“Hospitals provide a brilliant little arena for comedy. In certain situations things can get quite dark and they just need somebody to diffuse them. Sometimes you get it right and sometimes you get it wrong,” he adds.

This kind of environment provided fertile ground for Dave and his colleagues to put on pantomimes. He originally wrote and directed them, but when one performer took exception to his directing and walked off stage, Dave had to go on

and act himself. “I was terrified but once I saw them laughing, it was like a drug.”

After a colleague told him he should be a comedian, he started doing talent shows, later playing one gig a month as a hobby: “It took me three years or so to get a bit of motion.”

Originally performing in the ubiquitous working men's clubs, Dave “died horribly in half of them” because his observational comedy wasn't popular, but a comedy seminar evening in Bolton started featuring comics doing similar conversational humour to Dave.

“I got more and more work that way, then I started to go to gigs in London. That's where it became hard. I would work my days until quarter past five, then drive down to London, do a spot in a grotty pub and then drive all the way back up, all for nothing.”

## Comedy success

The first turning point was an open spot at the Comedy Score in London, which went so well that the management took

## ALL ABOUT DAVE

- ✓ Won Mastermind with the highest-ever score with the specialist subject, human blood: “I told the producers I'd love to do the red blood cell as my specialist subject. They said: ‘The red blood cell – it's a bit narrow though, isn't it?’ I thought: ‘A bit narrow?! It's bloody microscopic!’”
- ✓ Introduced column chromatography in the lab, which led to screening programmes in Bolton for hypochromic microcytic anaemia.
- ✓ Had an animal sanctuary at home – rescuing dogs, goats, ducks, battery hens – and works with a range of charities, including Animals Asia, Pet Rehoming and Paws for Kids.
- ✓ Has won two British Comedy Awards and been nominated for a BAFTA, appeared on *Parkinson* and the Royal Variety Performance, and is most proud of the Performance of the Year award for his first-ever tour show.

\* **Dave Spikey's 30th Anniversary Tour**, *Juggling On A Motorbike*, is at theatres around the UK from 27 September 2018. For details, visit [davespikey.co.uk](http://davespikey.co.uk)

him on as one of their acts. “The other massive turning point was meeting Peter Kay when he won the North West Comedian of the Year [Dave had won the award the previous year and as a result was compering the event].

“We got on straight away and wrote *That Peter Kay Thing* together, then we wrote *Phoenix Nights*.”

Dave's first career has influenced his second. “Over the years I've garnered so many stories. I never just tell one gag after another.” And despite his huge success, he misses it: “As soon as I walked in the lab I loved being part of that team. You met everybody, you knew everybody; it was a fantastic family, it was a fantastic place to work.” **BS**

