



John Dirks, MD

With a gifted intellect, a passionate commitment to global health, and an inspired leadership style, Dr. John H. Dirks has elevated Canadian and international science and education to unprecedented heights, particularly in transforming the Gairdner Foundation International Awards into “Canada’s Nobel Prizes.” In a career now spanning five decades, Dr. Dirks has made huge impacts in every field he has touched, from scientific and academic achievements in nephrology to the promotion and advancement of excellence in medical research in Canada and around the globe.

Dr. Dirks’ scientific and academic impact was felt almost immediately upon gaining his medical degree from the University of Manitoba in 1957. After three successful years at the National Institutes of Health, he moved to McGill University’s Royal Victoria Hospital as head of the Division of Nephrology, where he and his team made major contributions in renal physiology.

With characteristic energy and focus, Dr. Dirks quickly established the Division as a leading centre in kidney disease research in North America, attracting the best and the brightest and launching many distinguished careers. Dr. Dirks became Chair of Medicine at the University of British Columbia and, subsequently, Dean of the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Toronto, creating one of the largest health medical biotechnology clusters in North America.

Stepping onto the global stage, Dr. Dirks embarked on a new career in international health at the Aga Khan University in Pakistan, where he served as Dean-Rector. Because of his credibility and commitment, he was chosen as the founding Chair of the International Society of Nephrology Commission for Global Advancement of Nephrology (COMGAN) where he pioneered educational programs to improve the health of people all over the globe.

But the transformation of the Gairdner Foundation and its international awards program stands as Dr. Dirks’ most enduring work. Now ranking among the top three most prestigious prizes in the world for medical research and a consistent predictor of the Nobel Prize, the Gairdner awards (recently renamed the Canada Gairdner Awards) acknowledge the best and most important research accomplishments in biomedical science. With creativity and imagination, Dr Dirks brought radical changes to the organization without sacrificing its distinct Canadian style. He populated the Jury with the world’s top scientists, created national education programs, expanded the financial base of the Foundation, and established the first International Prize in Global Health – a clear expression of his international experience and perspective.

In the course of this work, Dr. Dirks has received many honours and awards. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, a recipient of major awards from the International Society of Nephrology and was appointed to the Order of Canada in 2006.