

## Mark Borisovich Mirsky

Historian of Russian surgery who challenged Soviet ideology

Professor Mark Mirsky was an internationally known historian of Russian medicine, surgery, and health care; a prolific writer and medical journalist; and head of the Moscow Scientific Society of Medical Historians.

Journalistic activity had a strong impact on Mirsky's scientific career. In a way he was the Russian counterpart of the late Roy Porter, a famous English medical historian (*BMJ* 2002;324:680, doi:10.1136/bmj.324.7338.680). Both were prolific journalists, and both suddenly died in traffic crashes. Nowadays most professional medical historians work in a narrow temporal and thematic framework. Mirsky was remarkable for his wide scientific interests. His many papers and monographs were dedicated to different periods of Russian medicine; Soviet health care; biographies of famous physicians and surgeons and Soviet ministers of health.

### October revolution

After the collapse of Soviet regime in 1991 he started to research previously forbidden topics, such as Russian medical emigrants after the October revolution of 1917, Stalinist repression of doctors, and the impact of foreign physicians on Russian medicine and health care. For example, he wrote about Robert Erskine (1677-1719) of Scotland who became the first Russian archiater and surgeon in ordinary to Peter the Great.

But it was a history of surgery that was the core of Mirsky's research. His *Khirurgiya ot drevnosti do sovremennosti. Ocherki istorii (Surgery from Ancient Times to Present: Essays on History)*, published in 2000, is often considered his greatest work. It has almost 800 pages and covers a period from the Edwin Smith papyrus, thought to date from the 16th century before Christ, to modern heart surgery.

His other major publication is *Meditsina Rossii X-XX vekov. Ocherki istorii (Medicine in Russia from the Tenth to the Twentieth Centuries: Essays on History)*, published in 2005. Here Mirsky called for a new approach to the history of Russian medicine and new ways of studying the subject, devoid of ideological distortions. He was concerned by the present lack of interest in the history of medicine in Russia, the decreasing number of Russian medical historians, and the low standard of scholarship. For him medical history involved a study

of the past to illuminate the present and lay the basis for future medical science and practice.

Mirsky was born in Dnepropetrovsk, Ukraine. His parents worked in industrial microbiology and biochemistry; his father headed the factory, and his mother worked in a laboratory. During the second world war the production of vaccines and sera was extended and shifted to the eastern parts of the country. Therefore, in 1942 the family moved to Irkutsk in Russia, and a year later to Samara (at that time Kuibyshev), where Mark graduated from high school with a silver medal for excellent results. He then moved to Moscow to study medicine.

### Meditsynsky Rabotnik

In 1954 Mirsky graduated from medical faculty of the Stalin Second Moscow State Medical Institute (now the N I Pirogov Russian State Medical University) and was assigned to *Meditsynsky Rabotnik* (now *Meditsynskaya Gazeta*), an official periodical of the Soviet Union's Ministry of Health that had a circulation of about a million copies. Today it is an independent periodical for doctors, published twice a week with a circulation of about 50 000. He aspired to become a surgeon and for a while worked part time at a surgical department in Moscow as a house officer. Mirsky stayed at *Meditsynskaya Gazeta* until 1969, except for a three year PhD at the Semashko Institute from 1960 to 1964. His PhD thesis was dedicated to the impact of communist and medical periodicals on internal medicine and public health during the first years of the Soviet regime (1917-1920). He became a head of department and member of the editorial board. After he left the periodical he regularly contributed essays on medical history.

Since 1969 Mirsky headed a group at the Institute for Organ and Tissue Transplantology (now

the V I Shumakov Federal Scientific Centre for Transplantology and Artificial Organs). His habilitation thesis defended in 1981 was dedicated to a history of transplant surgery in Russia and was published as a book in 1985. The director of the institute wanted to put his name as

the book's coauthor, but Mark refused this request and had to leave. From 1985 he worked at the N A Semashko Research Institute for Social Hygiene and Health-care (now the National Research Institute for Public Health), and from 1989 until his death he was a head of department for the history of medicine and health care at this institution.

In 1990 Mirsky became a president of Moscow Scientific Society of Medical Historians. He was a member of the International Society for the History of Medicine and vice president of the Confederation of Medical Historians.

Mirsky was a reserved person. Even those who worked together with him for many years knew nothing of his family or his political views. He enjoyed the company of smart women and was always dressed in style.

Mirsky was a lifelong admirer of the writer Anton Chekhov. He kept Chekhov's portrait in his office and published a book in 2003 on Chekhov as a physician. Mirsky and his wife died in a car crash while driving to their dacha near Moscow. Forensic examination was performed in a local hospital that bears a memorial plaque that Chekhov worked there as a physician after graduation from Moscow University in 1884.

### Boleslav Lichterman

Mark Borisovich Mirsky, medical historian (b 1930; q Stalin Second Moscow State Medical Institute 1954), died in a car crash on 19 June 2010.

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**He started to research previously forbidden topics, such as Stalinist repression of doctors and the impact of foreign physicians on Russian medicine and health care**

**Douglas Cecil Cornish**

Former medical adviser Rolls-Royce (b 1925; q St George’s Hospital, London, 1951; DObstRCOG), died from cancer of the oesophagus on 16 June 2010. Douglas Cecil Cornish (“Doug”) trained in medicine after wartime service in the Fleet Air Arm. He joined a general practice in Rugby in 1956. Developing an interest in industrial medicine, he initially worked part time for the Employment Medical Advisory Service and then full time with the Factory Inspectorate. In 1978 he joined Rolls-Royce at Coventry and Ansty and then Derby until he retired in 1987, researching Raynaud’s phenomenon in workers using vibrating machinery. A keen squash player and sailor, Doug enjoyed carpentry and music in retirement but mainly concentrated on bringing his garden to a state of near perfection. He leaves a wife, Mollie-Anne; four children; and 10 grandchildren.

**Howel Jones**

*Cite this as: BMJ 2010;341:c4419*

**Terence Telford Chapman**



Former consultant in respiratory medicine Royal City of Dublin Hospital (b 1921; q Trinity College Dublin 1946; MD, FACC), died on 17 June 2010 from respiratory failure a year after a cerebrovascular accident. After qualifying, Terence Telford Chapman (“Terry”) joined the Royal Navy, completing his MD on attachment to the Royal Marines. He then helped to set up a cardiopulmonary unit at Royal City of Dublin Hospital before being appointed consultant and establishing the first clinical respiratory function laboratory in Ireland. His research interests included asthma, silicosis, and air pollution. In 1978 he worked in Tamam Hospital, United Arab Emirates, being chief of medicine for six years

until 1986. He retired after two years as consultant chest physician in Queen Elizabeth II Hospital, Lesotho. He leaves his first wife, Aileen; his wife, Helena; two children; and four grandchildren.

**Suzanne Chapman**

*Cite this as: BMJ 2010;341:c4534*

**Alexander Rattray Dow**



Former consultant in accident and emergency medicine Sunderland Hospitals (b 1923; q Aberdeen 1952; FFAEM), d 25 June 2010.

Alexander Rattray Dow (“Sandy”) trained in medicine after demobilisation from the Glider Pilot Regiment. Captured on D-Day, he escaped and was sheltered by the French Resistance for three months until relieved by American Forces. After qualifying and house jobs Sandy worked in Jamaica for two years before becoming a general practitioner on a new housing estate in Sunderland and clinical assistant in the local accident and emergency department for 17 years. He became consultant in the department in 1973 until he retired, establishing an efficient department and a particular interest in hand injuries. He was also a magistrate. Predeceased by his wife, Anne, by three months, he leaves four children and nine grandchildren.

**Leslie Bartlet, Robin Donald**

*Cite this as: BMJ 2010;341:c4517*

**William Richard Easy**

Former consultant anaesthetist Vale of Leven Hospital, Alexandria (b 1944; q Edinburgh 1970; FRCA), died from a glioblastoma on 1 June 2010. After house jobs William Richard Easy (“Bill”) joined the Royal Air Force (RAF), serving as station medical officer before training in anaesthesia and becoming a consultant in the early 1980s. He retired from the RAF in 1989 and became consultant in



the west of Scotland. He developed key services, including intensive and high dependency care and the training of anaesthetic assistants; established the acute pain service; and popularised total intravenous anaesthesia. His embarked on a parallel farming career after buying a sheep farm, retiring from medical practice in 2006 to pursue farming and his many other interests. He leaves a wife, Karen, and two sons from his first marriage.

**Geoff Douglas**

*Cite this as: BMJ 2010;341:c4520*

**Ross Meuros Paxton**

Former consultant neuroradiologist Plymouth Hospitals (b 1944; q St George’s Hospital, London, 1967; FRCR, FFR, DMRD), died from oesophageal cancer on 19 May 2010. In the early 1970s at Atkinson Morley’s Hospital, Wimbledon, Ross Meuros Paxton co-wrote the first clinical papers on the then new computed tomography (CT) using the first clinical scanner. Joining the staff of Plymouth Hospitals as a consultant neuroradiologist in 1975, he set up the first regional CT scanner at Freedom Fields Hospital, Plymouth. An outstanding clinician, he was chairman of the radiology division and clinical director of the radiology department. He was forced to cease work by neurological complications of myocardial infarction in 1997, electing to retire though his functional recovery was spectacular. He approached his final illness with courage and pragmatism.



He leaves a wife, Pat; two daughters; and seven grandchildren.

**Richard Parrish**

*Cite this as: BMJ 2010;341:c4522*

**Eleanor Symmers (née Farrell)**



Former clinical assistant in rehabilitation medicine Community Rehabilitation Unit, Edinburgh (b 1942; q Glasgow 1965), died from a brain tumour on 6 May 2010. From 1967 Eleanor Symmers (née Farrell) trained at University College Hospital and the Tavistock Clinic in London, their psychodynamic and psychotherapeutic approaches influencing her practice from then on. After marriage and family commitments, she resumed psychiatry at the Royal Edinburgh Hospital in 1978, giving psychological support to women diagnosed with breast cancer by mammography during 1984-9. Her psychoanalytical training was almost completed in 1996 when she diagnosed her own subarachnoid haemorrhage, from which she fully recovered. During 2001-3 she attended a psychoanalysis course which entailed weekly trips to London and working the next day in Edinburgh. She leaves a husband, Bill; three children; and six grandchildren.

**Tom Anderson**

**Bill Symmers**

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