

## Susanna Isaacs-Elmhirst

Psychiatrist who applied analytical theory to help troubled children

Susanna Isaacs-Elmhirst, who has died at the age of 88, overcame a troubled childhood to dedicate her life to helping other children and young people deal with the effects of trauma and damage. Drawn towards psychiatry and psychoanalysis after a successful beginning in paediatrics, at a time when child psychiatry was in its infancy, she was in the vanguard of applying analytical theory to help children cope with emotional and family problems.

Although her childhood troubles were followed by tragedy in adult life, with the deaths of both her husbands after relatively brief marital happiness, she contributed more than four decades' work to children's services in the UK National Health Service and continued to work in the private and voluntary sectors into her 70s.

Born in London on 11 April 1921, she was the daughter of Hubert and Kate Foss. Her parents separated when she was young, and she did not see her father for a long period. Apart from two terms at a boarding school in Cambridge she enjoyed no formal education until she was sent at the age of 10 to Dartington Hall, the progressive boarding school recently founded in Devon. She would always say it was her saving grace.

### Traumatic childhood

Although she rarely mentioned her own traumatic childhood in her professional life, the experience motivated her interest in child development and remained a preoccupation throughout her life. "She was trying to help people make sense of their lives while she continued to struggle to make sense of her own," said her son Stephen, himself a child psychiatrist.

Highly intelligent, industrious, and single minded, Sue, as most people knew her, became the first Dartington pupil to study medicine when she gained a place at Bristol. But without family support she ran into financial difficulties. It was only through a Rockefeller scholarship that she was able to finish her studies at the University of Chicago, where she graduated as a doctor of medicine in 1943. Returning to the United Kingdom she passed her bachelor of medicine first with honours in London in 1944, having first failed the finals in Bristol, where examiners took a dim view of her enthusiasm for the new drug penicillin.

Her pleasure in working with children in the United States steered her toward paediatrics in Lon-

don and later Sheffield, where she worked under the pioneering paediatrician Ronald Illingworth. In Sheffield she met Alick Isaacs, a brilliant biologist who went on to work for the National Institute for Medical Research, where he discovered interferon. As a newly appointed paediatric consultant in 1948, Sue followed Alick to Australia the next year, working her passage as an assistant ship's surgeon, and they married in 1949 in Melbourne, where she worked for a year. After the couple returned to England they had twin boys in 1950 and a daughter in 1953.

Now juggling family responsibilities and supporting her husband's high flying career, Sue trained in psychiatry and psychoanalysis, becoming a keen follower of Melanie Klein, who emphasised the importance of observing children at play, and Donald Winnicott, the physician and child psychoanalyst at Paddington Green Hospital for children, London, who developed the ideal of the "good enough mother." She qualified as a child psychiatrist in 1960 and the next year succeeded Winnicott at Paddington Green, now part of St Mary's Hospital, to head the department of child psychiatry.

### Connect, engage, empathise

Inevitably meeting prejudice as one of the first women consultants, she countered opposition with humour and steely determination. A formidable personality, she was direct and forthright but had a natural talent with children. "She had a remarkable gift in working with very, very troubled children," said a former colleague, Judith Trowell, now professor of child and adolescent mental health at the University of Worcester. "She could absolutely connect, engage, empathise, and understand what was troubling a child."

While she continued working at St Mary's, and treated patients privately before and after work hours during the 1960s, she coped with her husband's devastating combination of brain haemorrhage and manic depression until his death at 45 in 1967. Two years later she found short lived happiness with Leonard Elmhirst, who had

founded Dartington Hall with his wife Dorothy, and was now a widower and 25 years her senior. They married in 1973 and moved to Los Angeles, where he died the next year. Sue stayed on, working as a psychoanalyst in Los Angeles and associate



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professor of clinical child psychiatry at the University of Southern California.

Returning to the UK in 1981 she worked as consultant psychiatrist at the Child Guidance Training Centre, London, and, concurrently from 1982, as director of the child and adolescent department of the London Clinic of Psychoanalysis. She retired from the NHS in 1986, but she continued working into her 70s.

Always she combined her three pronged disciplines—in paediatrics, psychiatry, and psychoanalysis—with her innate gift for connecting with children.

Having worked in paediatrics at a time when child abuse was becoming widely recognised, she encouraged fellow professionals to give evidence for children in court but retained a firm faith in the potential for families to recover. A typical and long sighted article in the *BMJ* in 1972 urged doctors to keep vigilant for signs of child abuse and act to protect children at risk yet warned against "a suspicious, over-simplified, and potentially accusatory approach" (1972;3:224-6).

After a severe stroke in 2001 she was forced to give up working. She died from pneumonia on 16 February 2010, leaving three children.

### Wendy Moore

Susanna Isaacs-Elmhirst, child psychiatrist (b 1921; q 1943 MD, Chicago, 1944 MB, London), died from pneumonia on 16 February 2010.

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**William Jonathan Abel**



Former consultant psychiatrist Hellesdon Hospital, Norwich (b 1915; q Edinburgh 1939; DPM, FRCPEd), d 3 April 2010. Having qualified immediately before the outbreak of the second world war, William Jonathan Abel ("Bill") joined the Royal Army Medical Corps for the duration of the war, serving in the North African and Italian campaigns. On his return to Edinburgh, he trained in psychiatry and was appointed consultant psychiatrist at Hellesdon Hospital, Norwich, where he remained until his retirement in 1979. He continued to work at Priscilla Bacon Lodge, Norwich, but moved to South Wales in 2007 to be nearer family. A committed Christian, he was a keen naturalist, musician, and lover of Norfolk churches. Predeceased by his wife, Margaret, in 2003, and by one child, he leaves four children and 12 grandchildren.

**Peter S Harper**

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**Mary Richmond Ellis**



Former general practitioner Harlington, Middlesex (b 1918; q Royal Free Hospital, London, 1942; MRCOG), died on 23 May 2009 after fracturing her femur. Mary Richmond Ellis spent time in hospitals, general practice, and the Royal Army Medical Corps. On the verge of becoming a consultant obstetrician and gynaecologist, she returned to general practice to provide a home for her father, and was a much loved and dedicated general practitioner in Harlington for 30 years. She delivered hundreds of babies.

Mary was active in St John Ambulance. She helped found Harlington Hospice Association, becoming its first president, and her house became Harlington Hospice. In retirement at Eton Wick she was a volunteer at Thames Valley Hospice before moving to Yarmouth, Isle of Wight. She leaves three nephews and a niece and seven godchildren.

**Juliet Boyd**

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**David Landsborough**



Former medical missionary and superintendent Chang Hwa Christian Hospital, Taiwan (b 1914; q Royal London Hospital 1937; FRCP), d 2 March 2010.

David Landsborough was born to missionary parents in what is now Chang Hwa, Taiwan, during the Japanese occupation, and was educated in China before medical training. During 1940-5 he was a medical missionary to Chuanchow Hospital on the Chinese mainland opposite Taiwan. After two years in the UK he returned to Chuanchow with his new wife until the Communist occupation of 1949, when they fled to Hong Kong. During 1952-80 David worked at Chang Hwa Christian Hospital, Taiwan, soon becoming superintendent and specialising in neurology. He was a locum neurologist in Surrey before retiring fully. Predeceased by his wife, Jean, in 1993, he leaves three children and five grandchildren.

**Donald Landsborough**

**David Landsborough**

**Katharine King**

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**Andrew Alexander Matchett**

Former general practitioner Arnside, Lancashire (b 1944; q Glasgow 1969), died from metastatic carcinoma of the bowel on 3 August 2009.



After house jobs in Ruchill and Stobhill Hospitals in Glasgow, Andrew Alexander Matchett joined the Royal Navy for a short service commission, in which he was appointed to HMS *Vidal*, a survey ship, and the Royal Naval Hospital Mtarfa in Malta. He was for a short time in general practice in Gillingham, Dorset, before he returned to Arnside to work with and eventually take over his father's practice of 40 years' standing. Andrew worked singlehandedly for 15 years and in partnership for another 15 until he retired in 2004. He was a keen sailor and helped with the disabled section of the sailing club at Windermere. He leaves a wife, Liz, and four children.

**Geoffrey Moore**

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2010;340:c2776

**Kenneth Fletcher Malcolm Thomson**



Former general practitioner and hospital practitioner in ear, nose, and throat (ENT) surgery York (b 1927; q Oxford/St Thomas' Hospital, London, 1951; DLO, OStJ), died on 4 January 2010 from a chest infection following Alzheimer's disease.

After house jobs in ENT and gaining his DLO, Kenneth Fletcher Malcolm Thomson did national service as junior specialist in ENT, mostly in Kure, Japan. After three years in Reading and a year in York as ENT registrar, he entered general practice in 1961, continuing to work as a hospital practitioner until he retired in 1992. A major in the Royal Army Medical Corps (Territorial Army), he was commanding officer of the ambulance

train until retirement, as well as area surgeon of St John Ambulance. He leaves a wife, Diana; three children; and eight grandchildren.

**Rachel Thomson**

**Angus Thomson**

**Alistair Thomson**

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2010;340:c2770

**David Hughes Vaughan**

Former consultant in public health North West Regional Health Authority (b 1927; q Edinburgh 1950; DPH, FFCM), died from ischaemic heart disease on 12 February 2010.



After qualifying and completing national service with the Royal Army Medical Corps in Germany, David Hughes Vaughan was assistant divisional medical officer in Failsworth before moving to Salford as deputy medical officer of health in 1959. In 1963 he became lecturer in social and preventive medicine at Manchester University and clinical epidemiologist for Salford. A foundation member of the Faculty of Community Medicine, he served as examiner and joint editor of *Community Medicine*. From 1974 until his retirement in 1992 he worked for North West Regional Health Authority, also being honorary lecturer and sub-dean of postgraduate medical studies. He leaves a wife, Margaret; four children; and eight grandchildren.

**Rosemary Beal**

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