

Norman Kreitman

Psychiatrist and suicide expert, poet, philosopher

Norman Kreitman (b 1927, q Westminster Hospital, King's College, London, 1949), died from cancer on 15 December 2012.

*"The shadow of a leaf falls upon the page
and as the breeze moves the shape skitters
as if writing my notes.
Yes I am listening, really,
although what I hear matters much less
than what you say . . ."*

Those words came from the heart of a poet named Norman Kreitman. The words are the opening lines of his 1984 poem "Therapist."¹ At the time, although a poet at heart, Kreitman was professionally a psychiatrist at the University of Edinburgh—recognised globally for his work in suicide, alcoholism, and depression. The poem reflects what Kreitman the psychiatrist felt was one of his most important tools.

"Norman's recognition of the importance of listening skills in research and therapeutic encounters was captured in those lines of the poem," says Stephen Platt, who worked with Kreitman in the late 1970s and 1980s. "He was a man without a trace of narcissism or egotism. He was genuinely interested in how others experienced the world, and wanted to give them time to articulate these experiences rather than put words in their mouths."

Kreitman's research interests were wide ranging. He investigated alcohol consumption and its associated health and adverse social consequences; depression in women, including precipitating and vulnerability factors; and the role of poor self esteem and other psychological variables, including pathways to their treatment, says Platt, now a professor at the Centre for Population Health Sciences, University of Edinburgh.

Perhaps Kreitman's most important contributions were his studies on suicidal behaviour. He introduced the concept and coined the term parasuicide—intentional self harm that does not result in death and is a strong indicator of future successful suicides.

Keith Hawton, director of the University of Oxford's Centre for Suicide Research, sees Kreitman's "most influential piece of work" as the paper, "The coal gas story. United Kingdom suicide rates, 1960-71."² Kreitman showed that a "huge reduction in suicide rates" corresponded to the change from toxic coal gas in domestic supplies to non-toxic North Sea gas.

"This study is perhaps the most impressive demonstration worldwide that suicide is heavily



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influenced by availability of means and that reducing access to a dangerous method can prevent suicides," he says.

Hawton, who first met Kreitman in the 1970s, says that his "painstaking approach to epidemiological research" was a major influence on the next generation of suicide researchers.

"He would take seriously suggestions, however naive, from the most junior of researchers and help reframe them in the context of existing knowledge," says Hawton, adding, "I will not forget intense discussions in smoke filled rooms as he chewed on his favourite pipe."

Norman Kreitman was born in London on 5 July 1927, the grandson of poor immigrants from eastern Europe. He attended King's College, London, training at Westminster Hospital and earning his medical degree in 1949. After spending 18 months in general medicine at a tuberculosis hospital on the Isle of Wight, he did a one year fellowship in pulmonary physiology at the Carlo Forlanini Institute in Rome. He returned to London as a registrar at Metropolitan Hospital.

In his spare time during the 1950s, he wrote poetry and socialised with other young poets.

He became friends with Welsh poet Dannie Abse (www.bmj.com/content/336/7640/391) and later wrote a paper entitled "Medical themes in the poetry of Dannie Abse."³

He entered psychiatry after a chance encounter six years after qualifying. One evening as he was leaving Metropolitan Hospital, he passed through the outpatient department. Benches had been removed and replaced with mattresses, on which were semiconscious patients who had just undergone electroconvulsive treatment. Kreitman was curious and introduced himself to the person in charge, the psychiatrist Edward Larkin, with whom he subsequently spoke often.

Kreitman was accepted for psychiatry training at Maudsley Hospital. "It was an exciting if somewhat stressful period," he later said.⁴ "A number of towering figures were on the staff at the time." The towering figures included the "dominating" Aubrey Lewis, as well as Eliot Slater, Erwin Stengel, and Felix Post.

In 1959 he joined the clinical psychiatry research unit of the Medical Research Council (MRC) in Graylingwell Hospital in Chichester, working under Peter Sainsbury.

In 1966 he moved to Scotland to join the MRC unit for epidemiological psychiatry in Edinburgh, later becoming its director. "The Edinburgh scene at that time was humming," he later noted.⁴ He added that he eventually came to feel as a naturalised Scot, even cheering for the Scottish rugby team at matches against England in Murrayfield Stadium in Edinburgh.

Kreitman's love of poetry endured during his decades as a doctor. He was closely affiliated with the Scottish Poetry Library and served as chair of the Poetry Association of Scotland. He published four volumes of poetry. He retired from psychiatry in 1990 at the age of 62, devoting his remaining years to his old love, poetry, and a newer love, philosophy, and aesthetics.

"He retired early because he had so much else to do: his poetry, his interest in aesthetics, his fishing, and his friendships," says Lady Joyce Caplan, chair of the Poetry Association of Scotland. "He led a life rich in intellectual and emotional experience, always moving forward into what life had to offer—right until the end."

Kreitman leaves his wife, Susan; a son; a daughter; a sister; and four grandchildren.

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References are in the version on bmj.com.

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2013;346:f1462