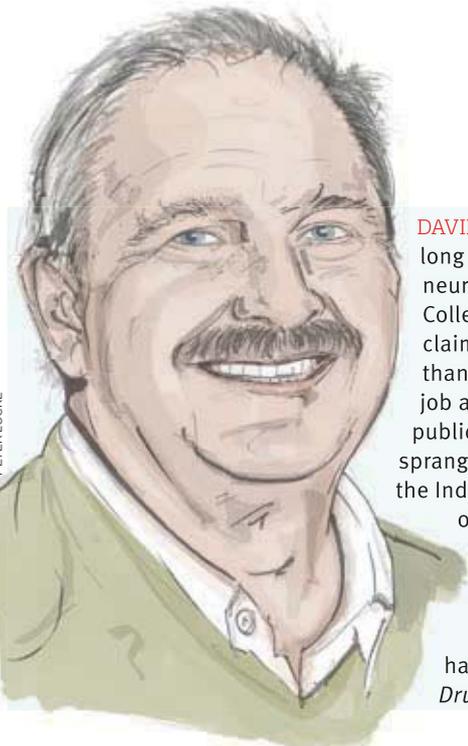


David Nutt

Fights establishment orthodoxy



DAVID NUTT has a short name but a long title: Edmond J Safera professor of neuropsychopharmacology at Imperial College London. He is famous for claiming that riding horses is riskier than taking ecstasy and for losing his job as a government adviser after his public criticism of drug policy. Many sprang to his defence, and he established the Independent Scientific Committee on Drugs, now called DrugScience, which he chairs. He supports a public health approach to drug addiction and an end to the criminalisation of users, and he has written a book arguing this case, *Drugs Without the Hot Air*.

Bevan or Lansley? Who has been the best and the worst health secretary in your lifetime?

"I consider the deceitful privatisation of the NHS that has taken place over my professional career to be one of the most damning legacies of our generation"

What was your earliest ambition?

I decided that I wanted to be a scientist when, in junior school, my teacher showed how atmospheric pressure could crush a large tin can—amazing proof of something you'd never imagine without scientific inquiry.

Who has been your biggest inspiration?

Ignaz Semmelweis. He collected data on maternal deaths from different practitioners and concluded that puerperal sepsis was caused by doctors transferring something from mortuaries to birthing suites. This predated the discovery of bacteria, so he was ridiculed by the medical profession—yet he was ultimately proved right. A lesson to us all not to let establishment orthodoxy get in the way of facts. I found his example very helpful.

What was the worst mistake in your career?

Joking at a senior house officer interview that, as a doctor, I was the black sheep in my family. I got the job, but it was apparently a very close thing.

Bevan or Lansley? Who has been the best and the worst health secretary in your lifetime?

Correct analysis—I'm a passionate fan of the NHS. This dates back to the 1960s, when I discovered that my father had had to give up his ambition to go to university: he had to leave school at 16 to pay for the private treatment of his younger brother, who had polio. I consider the deceitful privatisation of the NHS that has taken place over my professional career to be one of the most damning legacies of our generation. Most addiction services are now privatised, and I see the rest of psychiatry going the same way.

What was your best career move?

Getting a research fellow position at the MRC Clinical Pharmacology Unit in Oxford, where my enthusiasm for research was encouraged and supported. From then on my career flourished.

Who is the person you would most like to thank and why?

David Grahame-Smith (director of the MRC Clinical Pharmacology Unit in Oxford), who gave me my first opportunity to do research, from which I've never looked back.

If you were given £1m what would you spend it on?

Developing "alcosynth"—my safe alternative to alcohol. It would lead to a massive health gain as people switched from alcohol to this; alcohol currently causes over four million premature deaths a year worldwide. Some variants of alcosynth would also have antidotes—so you could go to a party, get intoxicated, and then rapidly sober up to drive home safely.

Where are or were you happiest?

With my children and grandchildren on our annual summer beach holiday in north Devon.

What single unheralded change has made the most difference in your field in your lifetime?

The growing limitations on prescribing medicines that are "off licence" and thus not evidence based. I see the ever increasing control by formulary committees and treatment algorithms as something that de-skills doctors: it limits their ability to understand and use drug treatments.

Do you support doctor assisted suicide?

Yes, if you mean euthanasia. People have as much right to a peaceful and pain-free death as they do to life prolonging treatments.

What book should every doctor read?

Awakenings by Oliver Sacks. This is a magnificent account of applying science to revolutionise the medical treatment of Parkinson's disease and is a paradigm case of the value of experimental medicine.

What poem, song, or passage of prose would you like mourners at your funeral to hear?

The Water is Wide, sung by Renée Fleming. As a west country folk song this reflects my origins as a Somerset boy, but it is also a haunting melody about love and hope. What more could you want at a funeral?

What is your guiltiest pleasure?

A (small) single malt at bedtime.

If you could be invisible for a day what would you do?

Explore the *Daily Mail* offices to see whether they really believe what they write or whether it's all a sophisticated parody of the worst of the English.

What is your most treasured possession?

My 1960 Austin-Healey 3000 Mark 1.

What personal ambition do you still have?

To get United Nations drug conventions rewritten and based on underpinning principles. Currently—unlike the newer conventions, such as the rights of people with disabilities—the drug conventions are not based on any principles other than that drug use is unacceptable.

Summarise your personality in three words

Enthusiastic, caring, humorous.

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