George Godber
Probably the best ever chief medical officer

George Godber was chief medical officer from 1950 to 1973. He was, said Sir Douglas Black (obituary BMJ 2002;325:661), "a medical lay saint, three terms that are normally incompatible"; Stephen Lock, a former BMJ editor, said, "He managed to be a saint without being a bore."

Sir George was brought up in Bedford, the son of a market gardener. From Bedford School he went to New College Oxford, where he was a rowing Blue. His tutor was the historian H A L Fisher, who also tutored Dick Crossman, who as an MP became Sir George's Secretary of State for Health. Sir George qualified in 1933 from the London Hospital, where he encountered patients with serious diseases who were too poor to pay for treatment and too proud to ask for charity. He earned the diploma in public health from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine in 1936. He spent two years in public health in Surrey before joining the then Department of Health. He was in charge of the North Midland region, which had no full time paediatrician or pathologist, when the Beveridge report was published. A former chief medical officer, Sir Wilson Jameson, picked him to be his successor but one. He organised wartime medical services, including maternity services for people evacuated from cities.

Sir George became deputy chief medical officer in 1950, two years after the birth of the NHS, when he organised country-wide consultant cover and brought in free contraception. He became chief medical officer 10 years later. The politician Tam Dalyell in his Independent obituary said that Sir George got on well with his health ministers, who included Nye Bevan, Keith Joseph, Enoch Powell, George got on well with his health ministers, who

He played golf and was in all senses completely on the ball until his mid-90s. He developed dementia in his last three years, but his personality and demeanour were unchanged. In old age he lectured for the University of the Third Age in Cambridge on Egyptology, stained glass, and more. He was an atheist and a staunch opponent of the Royal College of Surgeons to Lincoln's Inn Fields, where there were empty grand houses and building space near the College of Surgeons. He defended the merit award scheme when most Labour politicians wanted it abolished.

In 1952 he welcomed and implemented a proposal for a confidential inquiry into maternal deaths. Many years later, in 2001, the BMJ published a region-wide survey into perinatal near deaths by Susan Bewley, who shortly afterwards received a handwritten letter from Sir George, by then in his 90s, who said it was a piece of research he had long wished to see.

He remained in the post of chief medical officer until 1973, when he retired. He received an honorary fellowship at New College Oxford the same year, and in 1978 the public orator saluted him for his devotion to the development and administration of the National Health Service. His 85th birthday was saluted by publication by the BMA of essays in his honour, and on the 150th anniversary of the BMA a special issue of the BMJ carried a three page interview with him.

Sir George had, said Douglas Black, "a rare understanding of the genesis of medical advances and of how these may be applied to the health of the nation." Sir George favoured a consensus style of management and fostered it in his own office. He welcomed women as doctors and administrators.

He often advised other government departments, including education. His department was an umbrella to several "coma" committees—committee on medical aspects of various subjects, including nutrition. When Margaret Thatcher withdrew free school milk from children aged 8 to 11 neither he nor the committee on nutrition were consulted or informed.

Sir George was tall, well built, physically commanding, and wore a monocle. Douglas Black said he could be formidable in his weekly staff meetings. "Although he never paraded benevolence he not only wanted to do good but actually did it." He was usually brief, and always to the point. He worked hard and allowed himself little time for leisure.

He neither smoked nor drank. He was a man of infinite tolerance, except for smoking, and he abhorred promiscuity and the health and social problems it generated. Douglas Black said he had the "capacity to be at one time endlessly patient, at another time magisterial; and the discernment to know what behaviour was appropriate to what occasion. He deployed such skills . . . in untiring pursuit of a hope, earlier enunciated by Nye Bevan, of 'universalising the best.' " He got on well with Bevan, once complaining to him that the NHS would have provided him with spectacles but not a monocle (he had lost an eye in a childhood accident), "but they gave me this" and popped out his glass eye.

He weathered the rash of plans to reorganise the NHS in the 1970s and deplored the climate in which young British doctors emigrated.

After he retired, various governments tried to, as he saw it, turn the NHS into a business. As a civil servant he was not allowed to criticise government policy but privately made no secret of his disapproval.

He played golf and was in all senses completely on the ball until his mid-90s. He developed dementia in his last three years, but his personality and demeanour were unchanged. In old age he lectured for the University of the Third Age in Cambridge on Egyptology, stained glass, and more. He was an atheist and a staunch supporter of euthanasia; in his last few months he debated going to a Swiss euthanasia clinic, but events overtook him—he developed a chest infection and died from heart failure, having spent his last few months in a nursing home.

He married Norma Rainey, a nurse he met when they both worked at the London Hospital; she died in 1999. They had seven children: one was stillborn in 1944, and a year later a son and daughter died from Fanconi anaemia. Another son died of it aged 25, shortly before stem cell transplants became widespread. He is survived by a daughter, who was a children's nurse, and two sons, of whom one is a recently retired psychiatrist and the other was a civil servant in the Department of Health.

Caroline Richmond
George Edward Godber, former chief medical officer (b 1908; q London Hospital 1936; CB 1958; KCB 1962; GCB 1971), died on 7 February 2009.

Cite this as: BMJ 2009;338:b710
OBITUARIES

George Harry Berry

Former consultant radiotherapist and oncologist Cookridge Hospital, Leeds (b 1932; q Birmingham 1956; DObstRCOG, FFR, FRCR), died of complications of motor neurone disease on 29 July 2008.

After residency posts, George Harry Berry (“Harry”) spent his national service in the Royal Air Force. He was then in general practice in the Bury area for three years before specialising in radiotherapy at the Christie Hospital and Holt Radium Institute in Manchester. As well as being consultant in Leeds, he was visiting consultant at Bradford Royal Infirmary and Airedale General Hospital, Keighley, and senior clinical lecturer at Leeds University. After retiring at 65 he worked part time until he was 70. He enjoyed solving all the Daily Telegraph crosswords until quite late in his illness. He leaves a wife, Pamela, and two children.

Elizabeth Berry

Cite this as: BMJ 2009;338:b670

Herman Christian Nohl-Oser

Former consultant cardiothoracic surgeon Harefield Hospital, Middlesex (b 1916; q Oxford 1944; FRCS, DM), died from a heart attack on 13 June 2008.

Herman Christian Nohl-Oser (“Chris”) came to England from Germany shortly before the second world war, and initially found it difficult to obtain junior hospital posts. His MD thesis on the lymphatic drainage of the lung and the value of scalen node biopsy in bronchial carcinoma led to a Hunterian lecture in 1971. His textbook of operative surgery of the lung was published in English in Germany and translated into German and Spanish but was little known in England. He was a founder member of Pete’s Club, which informally discussed mistakes in treatment. Predeceased by his wife, Inga, in 1991, and by their son in 1987, he leaves two grandchildren.

Raymond Hurt

Cite this as: BMJ 2009;338:b671

Timothy Clive Northfield

Former professor of medicine St George’s, University of London (b 1935; q Cambridge/Guy’s Hospital, London, 1962; MA, MD, FRCP), d 2 May 2008.

Originally intending to read history at Cambridge after national service, Timothy Clive Northfield (“Tim”) quickly switched to natural sciences and training in medicine. At the Mayo Clinic he developed an interest in bile salt metabolism, and haemorrhage from peptic ulcer formed the basis of his MD thesis. In 1974 as consultant physician and senior lecturer at St James’s and St George’s Hospitals he pioneered risk stratification of peptic ulcer haemorrhage and its endoscopic treatment. His unit helped to establish the role of Helicobacter in dyspepsia, the epidemiology of H pylori infection, and the pathogenesis of peptic ulcer disease. After retirement, Tim gained an MA in regional and local history from Goldsmiths College, London. He leaves a wife, Rosemary, and two children.

Mike Mendall

Cite this as: BMJ 2009;338:b145

James Robertson

Angus White

Former consultant surgeon West Cornwall Hospital, Penzance (b 1912; q King’s College Hospital, London, 1937; MRCGP), d 22 January 2008.

For his work in the community he was made a Freeman of the borough in 1972. Predeceased by his wife, Edna, in 1994, he leaves four children and seven grandchildren.

Peter J White

Cite this as: BMJ 2009;338:b540

Douglas William John Radcliffe

Former general practitioner Dover (b 1913; q King’s College Hospital, London, 1937; MRCGP), d 22 January 2008.

In 1939 Douglas William John Radcliffe joined the Church Mission Society and worked as principal medical officer and surgeon in its hospital in Cairo, as well as being surgeon to the Anglo-American Hospital. Returning to the United Kingdom in 1950, Douglas joined the practice where he worked until he retired. He was also medical officer for the Dover Harbour Board and clinical assistant in otorhinolaryngology at Buckland Hospital. The death of his son, who developed hepatitis B from a patient in 1974 soon after qualifying, led Douglas to campaign for all health professionals to be vaccinated. In 1977 he received a Silver Jubilee medal. Predeceased by his wife, Elise, in 1990, he leaves three children.

Emma Radcliffe

Cite this as: BMJ 2009;338:b502

Consultant obstetrician and gynaecologist Alexandra Hospital, Redditch (b 1949; q Glasgow 1973; FRCOG), died of stomach cancer on 28 August 2008.

John Elias-Jones (“JEJ”) trained in Glasgow, Hong Kong, Dundee, and Cambridge before his consultant appointment, in 1986, to Bromsgrove and Redditch. There he set up the colposcopy and day care surgery services, and was a trustee of the local hospice for 17 years. An international sailor and a member of the 1977 Hong Kong Admiral’s Cup team, JEJ spent his final days on his yacht on the west coast of Scotland with friends and family after being diagnosed with inoperable cancer in July 2008. He was a good after dinner speaker, skier, and friend to many. He leaves his second wife, Susie; three stepdaughters; and three children.

Susan Blunt

Cite this as: BMJ 2009;338:b670

Kasam Rajeshwar

Former general practitioner Brownhills, West Midlands (b 1940; q Osmania, India, 1965), died from lung adenocarcinoma on 11 December 2008.

After qualification and marriage in India, Kasam Rajeshwar (“Raj”) found hospital jobs in Wales, Hull, and Bedfordshire, before working as a general practitioner in Luton and Dunstable. Finding the winters difficult, he returned to Hyderabad in the mid-1970s, setting up a private practice and a small nursing home. In 1978 he returned to the UK, settling in Brownhills. Initially he worked in a group practice and then singlehandedly for nearly 30 years with his wife as practice manager. Raj was also chairman of the Osmania Medical Graduate Association. He leaves a wife, Shyamala; three children; and two grandchildren.

Sudheer Manthri

Cite this as: BMJ 2009;338:b669

BMJ | 21 FEBRUARY 2009 | VOLUME 338

480