Anna Donald

Pioneer in evidence based health care and one of the BMJ's finest bloggers

In addition to insatiable curiosity, Anna Donald, unlike most of us, had a mission—she wanted high quality health care to be available to everybody. She developed her mission when a student at the Harvard School of Public Health. Entirely comfortable with mathematics and economics, she saw that inflation in the cost of health care always ran ahead of inflation in the general economy. Inevitably this would eventually make health care unaffordable, particularly for the poorest.

Anna was a young doctor in Oxford when evidence based medicine was being born, and while a senior house officer she published in 1995 one of the first articles on the subject, an article that has been cited 661 times. She lectured as well to sceptical and sometimes hostile professors without trepidation. Anna was convinced that a package of evidence based interventions, with all the excesses of medicine stripped away, could affordably provide high quality health care for all.

More interested in her mission than any institution, Anna pursued it in the NHS, the BMJ Group, and academia. She could have had a glittering career in any one of these—what a dean she would have made. Then she founded Bazian, a business promoting the use of evidence in health. Bazian was a source of evidence on what works in health. Always interested to develop, Anna left economics, and history she earned the union at Sydney University and then the second female Rhodes Scholar from Australia. After Oxford and Harvard, equipped with degrees in medicine, economics, and history she became a lecturer in health policy at University College London. She was a founding coeditor of the journal Evidence Based Health Policy and published influential books on evidence based health care and getting research into practice. Earlier she had published The Hands-on Guide for Junior Doctors, which is in its third edition.

When Anna joined the BMJ Group in 1997 she did a lot of the early work on Clinical Evidence, which has become an international source of evidence on what works in health care. Always interested to develop, Anna left the BMJ to found Bazian. She became convinced that understanding how to use evidence effectively was as complicated as any medical specialty, and she called the discipline “evidology.”

Anna’s breast cancer was first diagnosed in 2003, when she was in her mid 30s, and even then she saw the “benefits” to an evidologist of a serious diagnosis. Would the emotional trauma mean that her commitment to evidology would go out of the window or would it be useful? She found it useful and knew that there was a good chance that she would make a full recovery.

A luminescent ball

Unfortunately in February 2007 the cancer recurred. In her diary she described how she felt the next morning: “I’m going to die, and I’m totally loved and looked after, and this is completely fine.” She said to one of us, “When you discover you have metastatic cancer you think you’ve picked a black ball in the lottery. But I’ve discovered it’s a luminescent ball. I’m becoming the person I want to be. I’m not putting it off until I retire.”

Anna and her husband Michael returned to Sydney in the northern autumn, and she began blogging in April 2008 (URL above). Everybody—doctors and patients—can learn something from her blog. Read, for example, her account of a 10 day retreat of Vipassana meditation, when she did not speak but meditated for 11 hours a day: “The ultimate experience for scientists interested in observing the mind [and] mind-body interactions and getting a glimpse at who we are.”

In her last blog post, she described some ghastly symptoms in her usual light way and reflected how evidology “taught me how horribly wrong we can be about treatments, in both directions.” Near the end she wrote, “I really feel as if I’m carried along by this amazing international group of loving people. I can’t tell you what a difference it makes to hear from people all over the globe, especially when you’re chained to your bed and food pump.”

Anna leaves her husband, Michael, her parents, and a brother.

Richard Smith, Muir Gray


Cite this as: BMJ 2009;338:b436

“My prognosis is dismal, but I’ve come across sufficient, well documented ‘miracle’ cures to convince me that recovery is possible,” wrote Anna Donald in her BMJ blog. “The question is, is it possible in me?” Anna’s blog is at http://blogs.bmj.com/bmj/category/from-the-other-side/
Joseph Gauld Bearn

Former senior lecturer in anatomy Middlesex Hospital Medical School, London (b 1923; q London 1945; FInst BioI), d 31 October 2008. Joseph Gauld Bearn (“Joe”) was senior orthopaedic house surgeon at the Middlesex Hospital, 1946-7, and junior surgeon in the Royal Army Medical Corps, 1947-9, serving in Singapore, Burma, and Ceylon. He returned to the Middlesex and organised the teaching of topographical anatomy. In the 1970s he was also visiting professor in Baghdad and Tripoli. He published research on human body structures, the role of hormones in the fetal development of rats and rabbits, the anatomical drawings of Leonardo da Vinci, and medical history. Joe retired in 1980 and was an inspector in the Home Office’s Animals (Scientific) Inspectorate for 10 years. He leaves a wife, Anne; two children; and a granddaughter. Michael Harford-Cross

Cite this as: BMJ 2009;338:b427

Peter Terence Jackson

Former general practitioner Sheffield (b 1922; q Sheffield 1953), died from Parkinson’s disease on 22 December 2008. When a medical student, Peter Terence Jackson was called up to the Royal Artillery, achieving the rank of major and serving in Africa, India, and Burma. An unassuming man, he was awarded the Burma Star but never claimed it, saying he did not feel he deserved it. A devout Catholic, he lived his faith in a spirit of service and generosity to others. Parkinson’s disease gradually deprived him of any ability to move or communicate, but he gave a shining example in his uncomplaining, complete acceptance of his illness. He leaves a wife, Pat; two children; and two grandchildren. Derek R Cullen

Cite this as: BMJ 2009;338:b362

Pauline Winifred Lane-Mitchell (née Balmer)

Former consultant anaesthetist in private practice Harare, Zimbabwe (b 1925; q Cape Town 1950; DA, FFARCS), died from cardiac arrest on 29 December 2008. Pauline Winifred Lane-Mitchell (née Balmer) grew up in Kenya. Having won a Kenyan government bursary, she was required on graduation by the Kenyan Colonial Medical Service to do her internship in Nairobi. Here she also worked in primary care hospitals in more rural areas and later as an assistant anaesthetist. She specialised in anaesthesics in London, gaining her fellowship in 1957 while senior house officer at Hammersmith, West London, and St Mark’s Hospitals. She returned to Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) with her husband, William, and they both worked in the government hospitals and in private practice until they retired to Cape Town in 1984.

Cite this as: BMJ 2009;338:b359

Nabil Fakry Salama (Father Mikhail Ibrahim Salama)

Former consultant in obstetrics and gynaecology Royal Naval Hospital, Gibraltar (b 1939; q Ain Shams University, Cairo, 1963; MRCOG, FRCSEd), died from metastatic disease on 11 July 2008. Nabil Fakry Salama emigrated to the United Kingdom after qualifying and working in Egypt and Nigeria. He was a consultant for three years in Libya, and, after registrar training in England, spent a year in Saudi Arabia. He was consultant in Gibraltar during 1990-5. A devoted Christian, he was ordained a Coptic Orthodox priest, Father Mikhail Ibrahim Salama, in 1995 and served in Golders Green, London. He daily gave communion to patients in hospital, and in 2002 he set up the Coptic Medical Society to help UK doctors and fund healthcare projects in Egypt and sub-Saharan Africa.

Predeceased by William in 1986, she leaves two sons and four grandsons. Lauraine M H Vivian

Cite this as: BMJ 2009;338:b361

Kenneth Walter William Henry Walton

Former professor of experimental pathology Birmingham (b 1919; q University College Hospital, London, 1942; PhD, FRCPath, DSc), d 26 April 2008. Kenneth Walter William Henry Walton’s wide-ranging research in atherosclerosis and rheumatoid arthritis is still cited, and he shaped the contemporary scientific approach to rheumatology. He was demonstrator in pathology while still a student and served in the Royal Army Medical Corps, ending his service career in 1947 with the rank of major and as assistant director of pathology in the Hong Kong command. He returned to London and became reader in Birmingham in 1954 and professor in 1960 until he retired in 1985. He focused on developing rheumatology research, collaborated closely with local rheumatologists, and taught through mentorship. He leaves a wife, Cynthia; four children; and seven grandchildren. Gustav Born

Cite this as: BMJ 2009;338:b356