

## William T Close

US surgeon who was instrumental in controlling the 1976 Ebola epidemic

In October 1976 the world's first Ebola hemorrhagic fever epidemic struck Zaire, now the Democratic Republic of Congo, in the remote town of Yambuku. People infected with the virus were dying horrible deaths, with symptoms including severe sore throats, rashes, abdominal pains, and bleeding from multiple sites throughout their bodies. People were fleeing the area, and roads were blocked and commercial air travel stopped. Global health officials feared that the new virus might spread outward from Zaire into Africa and possibly beyond.

"It was scary," recalls Peter Piot, who as a young doctor was dispatched to Zaire from the Institute of Tropical Medicine in Antwerp, Belgium. He joined health officials from the US Centers for Disease Control, the World Health Organization, the Institut Pasteur, and others in the capital city of Kinshasa for a strategy and planning meeting with the Zairian health minister. "We were confronted with something new and unknown. It was a very traumatic experience."

### Fluent French

Also at the meeting was William T Close, a flamboyant American, who Dr Piot describes as "a very likable person who liked a good laugh and a good glass of beer." Close had been in Kinshasa since 1960 as a doctor at 1500 bed Mama Yemo hospital, personal doctor to President Mobutu Sese Seko, and chief doctor of the army. He listened as the global health officials told the health minister they needed safe transportation to Yambuku, some 600 miles (970 km) north of Kinshasa. But there was a problem: the military, which could provide air travel, had also fled the area and had no desire to return. And that is when Close, who spoke fluent French, took over.

"[Close] simply gave a call to a general and ordered a C130 transport plane," said Dr Piot, a former executive director of UNAIDS now founding director of the Institute of Global Health at Imperial College in London. Dr Piot said he and others were astonished. "I couldn't call a general in my country. The next day we flew in a military plane into the epidemic area."

Close stayed behind in Kinshasa, helping to coordinate efforts and as the vital link between health officials and the military, which provided planes and also helicopters for flights within the epidemic area. The medical team halted Ebola virus transmission by isolating patients, sterilising equipment and putting hospital workers in protective clothing. By the time the epidemic ended, 318 cases had been identified, of which 280 (88%) died, including 11 of 17 staff at the missionary hospital in Yambuku.

Laurie Garrett, senior fellow for global health at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York and expert on Ebola and other epidemics, said that had it not been for Close's ties to the military, global health officials would have had to rely on Christian missionaries and travel great distances along muddy roads.

"I don't think there is any doubt that the situation would have been disaster without Bill Close's help," she said. "He enjoyed an unusually intimate relationship with the top tier of power." She interviewed him years later about the epidemic, saying, "I found him mischievous. He had a twinkle in his eye."

William Taliaferro Close was born into a prominent family on 7 June 1924 in Greenwich, Connecticut. He spent his early years in Paris, where his father was a manager of the American Hospital. When he was 7 years old, a nurse at the hospital took him into an operating room. The boy was spellbound: from then he wanted to be a surgeon.

He attended Summer Fields School and Harrow in the United Kingdom before returning to the United States to complete secondary education. He entered Harvard University in 1941. In early 1943 and still only 18 years old, he married Bettine Moore and became an army pilot in the second world war.

After the war he earned his medical degree from Columbia University and trained as a surgeon at Roosevelt Hospital in New York. In the 1950s, he and his wife joined Moral Re-Armament, a reconciliation group now called Initiatives of Change. Because he spoke French, in 1960 the group asked him to spend six weeks in Zaire for the new nation's independence celebrations. He

ended up becoming one of only three doctors in the huge Mama Yemo hospital, later becoming director and trainer of many local doctors.

Dr Piot, who stayed in contact with Close over the years, said, "He was devoted to the health and wellbeing of the people in Congo."



**"The [Ebola] situation would have been disaster without Bill Close's help . . . He enjoyed an unusually intimate relationship with the top tier of power"**

### Increasingly disillusioned

But in 1977, homesick and increasingly disillusioned with President Mobutu, he reluctantly left Zaire for Big Piney, Wyoming, where he had bought a

home in 1970 for his wife and children. He became, in his own words, a "country doc," working out of a small office and making house calls. He wrote books, four of which have been published, and made several trips back to Africa.

In recent years he was diagnosed as having colon cancer, then prostate cancer. He lost sight in one eye after a routine cataract operation, but he continued to work with patients until just days before his death.

Close was a Fellow of the American College of Surgeons and of the American Academy of Family Physicians. In addition to his wife of 66 years, Close leaves three daughters, including the film actress Glenn Close, and two sons.

### Ned Stafford

William Taliaferro Close, surgeon (b 1924, q 1951 Columbia), died 15 January 2009 from a heart attack.

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**Anthony James Allen**



Former general practitioner Dorridge, near Solihull (b 1922; q Birmingham 1951; MRCP), died from prostate cancer on 31 December 2008. In 1939 Anthony James Allen (“Tony”) deferred his place at medical school and was commissioned in the Royal Artillery, serving in North Africa and Italy. After qualifying he and his wife, Mary, took over a small country practice then in Warwickshire, which developed into a group practice. Tony was a man of great charm, characteristically driving an old Bentley round the practice. He was chairman of Solihull local medical committee and the local branch of the Royal British Legion for many years. He leaves his second wife, Marie Therese; three daughters and his first wife, one daughter having predeceased him; and five grandchildren.

**P H Price, G W Thorpe**

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**Peter John Holmes Barron**



Former general practitioner Bournemouth (b 1923; q University College Hospital, London, 1946; DRCOG), d 25 December 2008. After house posts at University College Hospital and Bury St Edmunds, Peter John Holmes Barron served in the Royal Army Medical Corps for two years. During this time he married Pat (Chippindale), a fellow student and his wife for 59 years. They worked

together in a general practice for more than 30 years before retiring in 1985. Their house, attached to the surgery, contained a menagerie of pets, including a cayman, which you had to watch out for when taking a bath. He leaves Pat and three children.

**Tim Barron, Michael Atkinson**

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**Geoffrey Bennett**

Former chief medical officer UK Civil Aviation Authority, London (b 1926; q Oxford 1953; MA, FFOM), d 5 May 2008.

Geoffrey Bennett entered the Royal Air Force in 1945 and gained his wings, flying Mosquitos with four squadrons. In 1948 he gained a scholarship to Oxford to study medicine. In 1958, after a spell in general practice in Berkshire, he was research medical officer to BOAC and trained part time as an airline pilot, ending as first officer on the DC10. In 1964 he became chief medical officer to the Ministries of Aviation and Technology and then to the Civil Aviation Authority in 1972 until he retired in 1991. His many academic appointments included being reader in aviation medicine at Farnborough. He leaves a wife, Hilary, and four children from two previous marriages.

**Michael Joy**

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**Hugh Sutherland Dodd**

Former general practitioner Wokingham (b 1932; q Oxford/St Mary’s 1962; OSTJ), died on 29 November 2008 from renal failure after valve transplantation. At 16, Hugh Sutherland Dodd won a classics scholarship to Oxford. He started after national service but stopped when his father died. On returning to Oxford, Hugh switched



to medicine, gaining his second MB in 1955 with a dependent family and no funds. For three years he was a pharmaceutical representative with Aspro Nicholas, which sponsored him to finish his studies. Soon after qualification, he joined the Royal Air Force, serving in Aden and helping to pioneer renal dialysis at RAF Halton. In 1969 he joined the practice in Wokingham, also taking on the role of practice manager. He leaves his second wife, Elizabeth, and four children from his first marriage.

**Richard Firth, Jane Doran**

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**Sarah Kathryn Groome**



General practitioner Southwell, Nottinghamshire (b 1959; q Leeds 1982; DRCOG), d 26 June 2008. After qualifying, Sarah Kathryn Groome undertook house appointments at Harrogate District and General Hospitals and entered the Harrogate general practice training scheme in 1983. For a short period she joined a Solihull practice as a salaried general practitioner until becoming, in 1988, the first female partner at Southwell Medical Centre, where she worked for 20 years. Sarah was a respected and dedicated doctor, well liked by her patients and colleagues. Away from work, she enjoyed fell walking and travel. She leaves her parents and a brother.

**Brian Groome, Wendy Groome, Nigel Groome**

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**Derek Herbert Isaac**

Former consultant physician Musgrove Park Hospital, Taunton (b 1923; q St Mary’s Hospital, London, 1946; FRCP), d 1 January 2009. After qualifying and hospital posts, Derek Herbert Isaac was appointed consultant in Taunton in 1960, retiring in 1983. He established



the heart unit and introduced the first pacemakers, and informally claimed the first successful treatment of Q-fever endocarditis (he could find no other cure on record). An avid supporter of the NHS, he held senior administrative posts, including chairing the hospital management committee. Renowned for his wicked sense of humour and after dinner speaking, he was also an accomplished gardener and ornithologist. He took up wood carving in retirement, producing a frieze hung in his local church. He leaves a wife, Jane; two children from his first marriage; and three grandchildren.

**Tim Isaacs**

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**William Thomas Walker Lawson**

Former chief medical officer occupational health service, Wellcome Foundation (b 1921; q Liverpool 1944; DIH), d 7 February 2009. William Thomas Walker Lawson (“Bill”) developed an interest in occupational health during service with the Royal Air Force medical branch in Singapore. After demobilisation as squadron leader in 1948, he did the pioneer postgraduate course for the diploma in industrial health. After experience in industrial posts with ICI and Shell, he was appointed occupational health physician by the Wellcome Foundation in 1953. He initiated and developed a comprehensive occupational health service for the pharmaceutical industry at home and abroad. Awarded University Blues in tennis, cricket, and rugby, he became a keen golfer in retirement, and he was an enthusiastic amateur pianist. He leaves a daughter and grandson.

**Joanna Morris**

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