

Lenze Meinsma

Dutch antismoking doctor whose message was finally heard

Lenze Meinsma was laughed at when he appeared on Dutch television in the 1960s with the then uncompromising message “Smoking damages your health . . . it can even kill!” A nation in which 90% of men smoked dismissed Dr Meinsma, then director of the Dutch Cancer Society, as a “fanatic.”

He was certainly single minded, campaigning tirelessly through speaking engagements and school visits, writing angry letters to ministers and the press. Although he remained for years a voice in the wilderness, his efforts made him a national icon. He is remembered in his regional paper, the *Leeuwarder Courant*, on his death aged 85 as simply “the antismoking doctor.”

Steadfast individual

Meinsma was born in 1923 in Makkum, Friesland, in the north of the Netherlands, a region with a reputation, similar to the United Kingdom’s Yorkshire, for producing steadfast individuals. The son of a decorative painter in the local earthenware pottery factory, Meinsma instead studied medicine in the years after the second world war, first in Groningen and finally at Rotterdam’s Foundation for Higher Clinical Education, which was to become part of the Erasmus University Medical Centre.

It was a time when Richard Doll and Austin Bradford Hill were first publishing their research in the *BMJ* that linked smoking to cancer (*BMJ* 1950;ii:739-48). Meinsma embarked on a doctoral thesis to research cancer while launching a national system of cancer registration and joining the Cancer Society in 1953. He was to become its director, remaining there for more than a quarter of a century and laying the foundations for later policies that would discourage smoking.

He obtained his doctorate in 1963 in social medicine from Leiden University with a thesis looking at data on five year survival rates after cancer treatment. The same year he launched a national campaign, “No smoking action,” followed by “Youth smoking action” in 1964. In 1965 he published *Smoking and Risks*, which became known as his “little red book.” As early as 1967 he lobbied the government to

ban cigarette advertising, put obligatory health warnings on cigarette packets, and forbid smoking in public buildings.

His years’ long campaign described as “giving frank information over smokers’ self destruction,” received scant support either from the government or his professional colleagues, most of whom smoked. Despite highlighting research that showed that 12% of deaths could be ascribed to smoking, his call in 1965 for an offensive from the medical profession against smoking was largely ignored.

In what even he called his “one man show” he received brickbats from everyone from the tobacco industry to rail passengers. He was lambasted either as an “idiot” or “not to be taken seriously.” Among the countless references to him in the Dutch Medical Association journal *Medisch Contact* is a 1966 letter where he is variously accused of being “emotional”, “demagogic”, “fanatical”, and using “intimidation techniques.”

Yet in 1971 he achieved his breakthrough. The scientific associations of four medical consultants’ groups—cardiologists; internists; ear, nose, and throat specialists; and lung specialists declared it was “no longer responsible” for them to remain silent. They wrote to the then health minister Roelof Kruisinga with facts and data over deaths and disease caused by smoking. Within weeks a special committee of the Dutch Health Council was formed to advise on measures to limit smoking.

Political action was still painfully slow but by 1974 the first government subsidised campaigns against smoking were launched. It was not until 1982 that government health warnings on cigarette packets became obligatory. Two years previously Meinsma had stood down as head of the Cancer Society, his pioneering role against the dangers of smoking complete.

Today the society has applauded his “admirable efforts and perseverance.” But it also believed his “driven” approach had begun to cause tensions in an organisation reliant on public support.

Doubts over evidence

The society, together with the Asthma Funds and the Heart Foundation, had, however, set up an organisation Stivoro to campaign specifically against smoking. Meinsma was its first director but left after about a year. He later refused invitations to anniversary events, insisting that that

part of his life was closed. And in an ironic twist to his career he expressed doubts over the scientific evidence for the dangers of passive smoking.

Rog De Jong, a successor at Stivoro, explained, “He had been vilified. He was a difficult man, a typical stubborn Friesian, self willed,” but also, “tenacious and dogged,” “never admitting that you are wrong. That was his character.”

But he added, “He had been a figurehead, a tough man, we wanted to honour him as the man who started things, the first fighter, but,

he said, ‘I don’t want anything more to do with that.’”

Willem van den Oetelaar, chairman of Clean Air Netherlands, which campaigns for smoke-free public places, thinks he was exactly the right person for the moment. “In the beginning I think his approach was right to get attention. He was a doctor too, and therefore he had authority. You have to admire the fact that he continuously sailed against the wind, restarting the discussion and spelling out the dangers.”

He leaves a partner, Iwan Zain.

Tony Sheldon

Lenze Meinsma, former director of the Dutch Cancer Society and Stivoro (b 1923; q Rotterdam early 1950s), died 19 December 2008.

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Was variously accused of being “emotional”, “demagogic”, “fanatical,” and using “intimidation techniques”

Alexander Gordon



Former consultant in neuropathology Western General Hospital, Edinburgh (b 1925; q Edinburgh 1948; MD), d 15 August 2008.

After qualification, Alexander Gordon (“Alex”) worked in St Albans and then with the Royal Air Force in Khartoum. By 1957 he was back in Edinburgh, where he became a central figure in the emerging clinical neurosciences group. Always a modest man, he did not realise how wide his influence was in the department and beyond. He was renowned as a teacher in the laboratory, where his dry wit enlivened many a diagnostic session. His long collaboration with the MRC Brain Metabolism Unit in Edinburgh resulted in several research publications. Alex retired in 1990 but continued for some years as a crematorium referee. He leaves a wife, June; three children; and four grandchildren.

Jeanne Bell

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Cedric John Vincent Helliwell



Former senior medical officer Heathrow Airport (b 1921; q St Mary’s Hospital, London, 1944; MRCP), died on 31 December 2008 after a stroke. After qualifying in 1944, Cedric John Vincent Helliwell (“Charles”) joined the Royal Navy for the duration of the second world war and was one of the first doctors to treat prisoners of war at Changi prison, Singapore. He enjoyed a varied career as a general practitioner in Malaysia, Tanzania,

and Canada before returning to England, where he was appointed senior medical officer at Heathrow Airport. His extensive experience of tropical medicine was called on frequently during his tenure there. In his retirement he was a keen golfer and maintained his interest in medicine until his recent illness. He leaves a wife, Patricia, and three sons.

Michael Helliwell

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Ian Macdonald



Former professor of physiology Guy’s Hospital Medical School, London (b 1921; q Guy’s Hospital 1944; PhD, MD, DSc), died from an acute respiratory infection on 23 December 2008. After early years in the Royal Army Medical Corps and research posts in South Africa, Ian Macdonald returned to the physiology department at Guy’s and its concern with gastrointestinal function. When battle was joined over dietary fats and carbohydrates and sugar, Ian, now in leadership positions of the Nutrition Society and the British Nutrition Foundation, maintained a puckish objectivity. His teaching and research programmes intensified greatly when the medical and dental schools of Guy’s and St Thomas’s united in 1982. The department’s studies were diverse and included collaborations with Harvard on tooth eruption. Predeceased by a son, he leaves a wife, Rose, and two children.

Harry Keen

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Norah Frances Metcalf (née Lambe)

Former professor of embryology University of Nebraska (b 1918; q Newcastle 1943), d 2 March 2009. Norah Frances Metcalf (née Lambe) met her husband, William Kenneth Metcalf (“Ken”), a fellow student, at

medical school. They emigrated to the United States in 1968 to take up faculty positions at the University of Iowa Medical School. They moved to Nebraska in 1973 to faculty positions in the Department of Anatomy, both retiring in 1991. An inspiring teacher, for which she received many awards, Norah was invited to the medical school at Lagos, Nigeria, as a visiting professor to develop and present an embryology programme. She was also active in research. She leaves Ken; seven children; and 13 grandchildren.

William Kenneth Metcalf

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Willie Philip Mitchell

Former general practitioner Epworth, Lincolnshire (b 1927; q Leeds 1954), died from complications of cerebrovascular disease on 24 September 2008.

Willie Philip Mitchell (“Phil”) studied medicine after national service in the Royal Marines. He became a principal in Epworth in 1958, and was in partnership with his wife, Jane, for five years from 1964 until an additional partner joined. An innovator, he was a member of the British Association of Manipulative Medicine, sat on the Lincolnshire local medical committee for several years, and was on the committee of the Scunthorpe branch of the BMA during the early 1970s. In 1975 he became a GP trainer. When he retired in 1990 the practice covered several surrounding villages and had five partners. He leaves Jane; three children; and four grandchildren.

Robert Mitchell

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Theo Legate Schofield



Former consultant surgeon, Royal United Hospital, Bath (b 1918; q Liverpool 1942; ChM, FRCS), d 23 January 2009.

On qualifying, Theo Legate Schofield joined the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve, serving in destroyers and with the Fleet Air Arm. After demobilisation, he returned to the department of surgery at Liverpool. In 1955 he was appointed consultant general surgeon in Bath, his special interests including breast, thyroid, and gallbladder surgery. He retired in 1981 when he felt he was no longer allowed to manage his own operating and waiting lists. A keen advocate of education, he initiated and raised funds for the Postgraduate Medical Education Centre in Bath and was an examiner for the Royal College of Surgeons. Predeceased by a son, he leaves a wife, Marjorie; two children; and five grandchildren.

Theo Schofield

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Mary Rosamund Webster (née Thompson)



Former consultant obstetrician and gynaecologist Bridlington, Yorkshire (b 1910; q Royal Free, London, 1935; FRCOG), d 12 October 2008. The daughter of a founder surgeon of Leeds General Infirmary and one of the first women to qualify as a doctor in England, Mary Rosamund Webster met her husband, Bill, when they both worked at Leeds General Infirmary. During the second world war, when Bill was a prisoner of war, Mary developed her career as an obstetrician and gynaecologist in Manchester. After the war they moved to Bridlington. Mary developed a dedicated team at Avenue Hospital, which gained a reputation for skilful intrapartum care and the care of premature babies. She was also a magistrate and active in the Lifeboat Association and NSPCC. Predeceased by Bill in 1998, she leaves three children and four grandchildren.

Jane Moore

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