

Cecil Helman

General practitioner, author, and proponent of medical anthropology

“The art of medicine is a literary art. One that requires of the practitioner the ability to listen in a particular way, to empathise, but also to imagine. To try to feel what it must be like to be that other person lying in the sick bed, or sitting across the desk from you. To try to understand the storyteller, as well as the story.” These were some of the words written for the *Lancet* in 2003 of Cecil Helman, general practitioner, medical anthropologist, author and poet, who died recently at the age of 65 (2003;361:2252).

Helman became widely regarded as one of the founders of the discipline of medical anthropology, the cross cultural study of health, illness, and medical care. His book *Culture, Health, and Illness*, first published in 1984, went to five editions and remains the standard text in this field. It was in this book that he described what became known as Helman’s folk model of health and illness. The model uses a narrative approach to examine how people put their illness experience into a coherent thread and encourages those who are struggling because of their current narrative to put their life experience into a different, more empowering one.

Literary career

In addition to medicine and medical anthropology, Helman had a parallel but related literary career, which began with a series of unpublished short stories while at medical school. He became known in the wider literary world through publications such as *Body Myths*, a book of essays on the symbolism and iconography of the body in modern medicine and popular culture. His 2006 memoir, *Suburban Shaman: Tales from Medicine’s Frontline*, received widespread acclaim. It was selected by the BBC as a book of the week and serialised on BBC radio. His friend and fellow doctor-writer Oliver Sacks described it as “a beautifully written, devastatingly honest, and often very funny account of an audacious and adventurous life.”

Helman was born in Cape Town in 1944 and qualified there in 1967. He left South Africa shortly afterwards and set out, after

a brief spell as a ship’s doctor, upon his 27 year career as a London general practitioner. Informed and inspired by working on medicine’s front line, with patients from so many different backgrounds and cultures, his interest grew in the humanistic side of medicine, especially the role of stories and narratives and what they reveal about the inner world of doctor and patient. He took a postgraduate diploma in social anthropology at University College London (UCL) in 1972 and, after a fellowship in social medicine and health policy at Harvard Medical School in 1982-3, he returned to London to combine working as a general practitioner and as a senior lecturer in primary care at UCL. He subsequently took on an additional post as associate professor of medical anthropology at Brunel University, where he taught regularly on a popular masters degree in medical anthropology and contributed to the development of the university’s Centre for Research in International Medical Anthropology.

As well as teaching several generations of undergraduate and postgraduate students at UCL, Brunel, and elsewhere, Helman wrote numerous chapters and published papers widely in medical and anthropological journals. His research used mainly qualitative and anthropological methods to respond to questions about health beliefs and behaviours and the role of cultural and social factors in health, illness, and medical care. Recent examples of his work are studies of reasons for the low uptake of childhood immunisations among rural communities in South Africa and patients’ attitudes to a low vision clinic at Moorfields Eye Hospital.

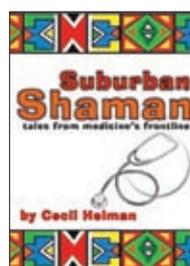
Crossed traditional boundaries

Perhaps as a result of his own migrant history, his sometimes outspoken scepticism of institutional processes and the fact that his work unapologetically crossed traditional boundaries between medicine, social sciences, arts, and humanities, there was some sense of the maverick in Helman. He himself wrote of being criticised by doctors as “too literary” and anthropologists as “too medical.” In some ways he relished his individualism, but in others he craved greater recognition from his academic peers.

Helman brought his own personal warmth and humanity to the study and practice of medicine. Anthropology, he said, “taught me the importance, in both doctoring and

writing, of being a participant-observer. To be deeply involved in human situations, and yet somehow detached enough to write about them afterwards.” Even as illness stole his speech and his strength in the final weeks of life he continued to write. We understand he completed the manuscript for a sequel to *Suburban Shaman*, provisionally entitled *An Amazing Murmur of the Heart*. Watch out for a moving and fascinating read as a memorial to a multitalented physician-writer and teacher.

Helman’s model uses a narrative approach to examine how people put their illness experience into a coherent thread



He was previously married to Vetta, with whom friendship continued to the end, and leaves their daughter Zoe.

Joe Rosenthal and Surinder Singh

Cecil Helman, general practitioner and senior lecturer at UCL (b 1944, q Cape Town 1967), died from a chest infection complicating motor neurone disease on 15 June 2009.

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2009;339:b2904

Joseph Attard

Former consultant general surgeon Malta (b 1932; q Malta 1955; MD, BSc, FRCS), died from a brain tumour on 11 April 2009.

After house jobs in Malta, Joseph Attard came to England to work in hospitals in London, Coventry, and Southampton. He returned to Malta in 1970 to work entirely in private practice. With the medicopolitical upheaval of the late 1970s and the government's takeover of private hospitals, he was forced abroad and worked as long term locum consultant in hospitals in England and Saudi Arabia. When the political temperature cooled, he returned to Malta and resumed his private practice, continuing to operate until the onset of symptoms a year before he died. Predeceased by his wife, Maureen, in 2007, he leaves three children and a grandson.

R Attard

Cite this as: BMJ 2009;339:b2961

Lisa Bawden



General practitioner Wokingham (b 1976; q Birmingham 1999; MRCP), died from metastatic oesophageal adenocarcinoma on 1 June 2008.

Always popular, Lisa Bawden sailed through medical school. A dedicated and compassionate professional, she was frustrated by the time constraints in the NHS. Her clinics often overran because she inadvertently spent extra time with her patients. She began her postgraduate training in obstetrics and gynaecology and then medicine before moving to Australia for a year to practise medicine. On her return, she trained as a general practitioner. Lisa married Steve in 2006 and became a partner in April 2007, only a few months before her diagnosis. She never gave up hope that her illness would be cured and endured

multiple rounds of chemotherapy, remaining extremely dignified and elegant throughout.

Claire Dunstan

Cite this as: BMJ 2009;339:b2958

Dorothy Black (née Stewart)



Former associate specialist in ophthalmology, Eastern Health and Social Services Board, Northern Ireland (b 1923; q Belfast 1949; DPH, DOMS RCPSI), d 19 June 2008.

An interest in the physics of light led Dorothy Black (née Stewart) to specialise in ophthalmology, and she provided ophthalmic care in Belfast in both community and hospital settings, including the Royal Victoria Hospital, for almost 30 years. Behind her modest, unassuming nature and dry sense of humour lay an agile and inquiring mind and a quiet determination. She was an acute diagnostician, a skilled teacher, and a considerate and loyal colleague, and gave each patient her full, expert, and sympathetic attention. She loved the natural world and travelled widely, most recently to the plains of Patagonia and the heights of Machu Picchu. She leaves a husband, Gerald, and two daughters.

Desmond Archer

Cite this as: BMJ 2009;339:b2964

Stella Candler (née Hill)



Former senior clinical medical officer Devon (b 1924; q Bristol 1947), died from Parkinson's disease and lymphoma on 23 September 2008. After house jobs in Bristol, Stella Candler (née Hill) set up home

in Bideford with Tom, a general practitioner. She saw a need for family planning services in Devon when this was not part of usual NHS care. She and Dr Margaret Jackson developed their own techniques when intrauterine devices were just becoming available, sterilising drinking straws and knitting needles to use as introducers. Stella was an enthusiastic organic gardener, and she and Tom used to open their town garden in aid of medical charities. Even when severely disabled by illness, she was propagating seedlings and cuttings in her conservatory. She leaves Tom, three children, and seven grandchildren.

Hilary Richards

Clive Richards

Cite this as: BMJ 2009;339:b2956

Luka Randić



Specialist registrar in emergency medicine Manchester Royal Infirmary (È 1978; q Manchester 2001; MFAEM), died as the result of a road traffic crash on 11 May 2008.

Luka Randić was a "one off": a Croat with a Californian driving licence and a grin from ear to ear. He and his parents came to the UK in the early 1990s to escape the war in former Yugoslavia, and he quickly adapted to his new life. He was interested in emergency medicine as a student, his project on burns in major incidents helping to shape national guidelines. In his last position he developed the evidence based knowledge and rapid assessment skills which made him a "safe pair of hands" despite his youth. A keen cyclist, he leaves his parents, girlfriend, and many friends.

Bernard A Foëx

Simon Carley

Douglas Speake

Cite this as: BMJ 2009;339:b2960

John Richard Burton Williams

Former consultant haematologist Lister Hospital, Stevenage (b 1923; q St Bartholomew's Hospital, London, 1946; MD, FRCPath), d 3 June 2009. As a student, John Richard Burton Williams received the Kirkes gold medal for clinical medicine, and in 1952 an MD and the Laurence gold medal. He was appointed consultant haematologist to the Lister Hospital at the age of 32. His academic background proved invaluable in his laboratory, clinical, and research activities. He published papers on clinical and experimental haematology and clinical pharmacology. A talented musician, he performed for many years with "The Elizabethans." He leaves a wife, Jean; four children; and five grandchildren.

Sylvia Watkins

Cite this as: BMJ 2009;339:b2963

John Forrester Brown Wyper



Former consultant in obstetrics and gynaecology Aberdeen (b 1915; q Glasgow 1937; MRCOG), d 8 June 2009.

In 1938 John Forrester Brown Wyper became senior house officer in Aberdeen doing clinical work and teaching students, which thwarted his call up for war service. He conducted research reducing still births and neonatal deaths, and became a consultant at 29. After serving in the army at the end of war in Europe, he returned to Aberdeen in 1949. In 1962 his long term study confirmed that many with infertility problems could be helped. He also pioneered the promotion of family planning. He retired at 65 to a hill farm in Aberdeenshire, playing golf every day into his 80s. Predeceased by his wife, Margaret, three and a half years previously, he leaves four children.

D J Wyper

Cite this as: BMJ 2009;339:b2962