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Donald Acheson

Former English chief medical officer who fought to contain the new AIDS epidemic

On appointment as chief medical officer (CMO) for England, Sir Donald Acheson's sense of personal authority and status gained him access to government ministers that some of his predecessors had not dared ask for. It proved critical to his success in dealing with a key medical problem of the late 20th century—AIDS. There were only 28 cases in the United Kingdom in 1983, but the news from the United States was frightening. Acheson's passionate conviction that this epidemic must be quashed before it could take hold was one of his strengths in persuading the government and his colleagues to take it seriously. At his request the prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, established a cabinet committee through which Acheson could orchestrate a scientifically informed response—one that jarred at times with the UK's conservative culture.

A national media campaign of unprecedented proportions was launched to explode the myths on how the disease was transmitted. "AIDS—DON'T DIE OF IGNORANCE" leaflets were delivered to 23 million homes. A week in February 1987 incorporated 19 hours of public service broadcasting across all four television channels. Harm minimisation was the underlying message: safe sex rather than no sex. Acheson was successful in getting ministers to drop plans for compulsory testing and to turn a blind eye to illegal drug use, allowing needle exchanges for drug users in the interests of wider public health.

Explicit television interview

Acheson "ate and slept AIDS from 1985 onwards," determined to take every precautionary measure possible to halt the spread of the disease, from working as an intermediary between the gay community and the medical profession, to meeting with the English Collective of Prostitutes. Despite his Calvinistic upbringing he ensured that he knew the facts of gay sex and conveyed them in detailed briefings to government ministers. He persuaded the secretary of state for health, Norman Fowler, to give an explicit television interview on the steps of 10 Downing Street to dispel some of the initial vagueness about the safe sex message and to make the public realise that AIDS was not a threat only to the health of gay men.

On an international level, Acheson used his authority at the World Health Organization to develop programmes for AIDS prevention. His



NICK SINCLAIR

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achievement in halting the AIDS epidemic in the UK was not immediately apparent. As worldwide deaths from AIDS increased in the 1990s, the emergence of cases in the UK slowed, but he was not given the credit until much later for his unremitting attack on this frightening new disease.

The AIDS crisis of the mid-1980s had established the CMO as the publicly recognisable face of medical expertise. By 1990, as the first human cases of variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (vCJD) appeared, Acheson was under pressure to make a public statement. He made a videotape for circulation to television channels, stating that British beef remained safe for everyone to eat. What his expert advisers had actually said was that there was a remote risk, not that there was no risk. His statement was criticised by the Phillips inquiry on BSE in 1998, but Acheson maintained that his words had been edited from his original videotape.

Inequalities in health

After Acheson retired as CMO in 1991 he held a number of honorary and visiting positions and completed projects for WHO, notably in war torn

Bosnia in 1992-3. He also chaired the influential independent inquiry into inequalities in health at the request of the new Labour government in 1997. The resultant Acheson report gave 39 recommendations, ranging from restricting tobacco smoking in public places to improving school meals and better sex education, many of which were subsequently implemented.

Acheson was born in Belfast. He was educated at Merchiston Castle School, Edinburgh, and at Brasenose College, Oxford, qualifying in 1951 to take up clinical posts at the Middlesex Hospital.

In 1962 he became the first director of the Oxford Record Linkage System, which pioneered the use of patient admissions data for epidemiological and health service research. In 1968 he was appointed as professor of clinical epidemiology

at the University of Southampton and in the same year as foundation dean of its medical school. From 1979 to 1983, he also served as director of the environmental epidemiology unit of the Medical Research Council.

Acheson was the first CMO with no previous civil service experience. He would not have been appointed as CMO in 1983, but for Margaret Thatcher's objection to the promotion of Elizabeth Shore, wife of the Labour peer Peter Shore. The Department of Health's intricate succession planning was overturned and an external candidate headhunted.

His first marriage was to Barbara Mary Castle, a staff nurse whom he had met at the Middlesex Hospital. They had a son and five daughters (one of whom predeceased him). This marriage ended in 2002 and in the same year he married Angela Judith Roberts, with whom he had a daughter.

Sally Sheard senior lecturer in history of medicine, University of Liverpool

Ernest Donald Acheson, chief medical officer, 1983-91 (b 1926; q 1951, Brasenose College, Oxford), died on 10 January 2010.

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2010;340:c419

John George Banton



Former general practitioner Eastwood, Nottingham (b 1929; q Leeds 1953; MRCGP, DRCOG), died from colon cancer on 18 July 2009. John George Banton was the first student from Heanor Grammar School in Derbyshire to go to medical school. After house jobs in Bradford, he returned to his home town of Eastwood and was general practitioner there for 39 years. In 1976 he became one of the first trainers on the Nottingham vocational training scheme, a role he greatly enjoyed, instilling the importance of listening to patients and never being surprised by human behaviour. Away from work, he loved walking, particularly in the Lake District, and trekking in the Himalayas, New Zealand, and Kenya. Predeceased by a son, he leaves a wife, Dorothy; three children; and six grandchildren.

Dorothy Banton

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Frederick Nii Lomote Engmann

Former professor of anatomy and dean Accra Medical School, Ghana (b 1933; q Cambridge/St Thomas' 1962; BA (Hons) Anatomy; PhD), died from colon cancer on 15 February 2009. Frederick Nii Lomote Engmann ("Fred") left Ghana to study medicine in the UK. After house jobs, he returned to Ghana and helped to set up its first medical school, becoming the first Ghanaian anatomist having gained his PhD in Cambridge. Fred was also vice president of the Ghana Medical Association, and in 1978 as representative of the association he helped to craft the constitution for the third republic of Ghana. He co-wrote a television series *You and Your Body*. On retiring, he continued to teach part time at the medical

school. Anatomy strengthened his Christian faith throughout his life. He leaves a wife, Maude; two sons; and four grandchildren.

Janet Baker

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2010;340:c488

James Kerr Finlayson

Former consultant in cardiology Aberdeen Royal Infirmary (b 1923; q Aberdeen 1954; BSc (Hons), FRCP), died from metastatic prostate cancer on 28 November 2009. As a civil engineer, James Kerr Finlayson ("Jimmy") did war service with a West African division in India, attaining the rank of captain. In 1947 he was employed by Tees Water Board before studying medicine in Aberdeen and graduating with honours. Appointed consultant with interest in cardiology in Aberdeen Royal Infirmary in 1964, he developed cardiac pacemaking and pioneered telephone transmissions of electrocardiograms from Orkney, Shetland, and elsewhere. In retirement he made and played bagpipes, sang with Aberdeen Gaelic Choir, and was an enthusiastic golfer. Predeceased by his wife, Dr Anna Robertson, he leaves three sons and three grandchildren.

F L Pierre Fouin

Michael J Williams

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2010;340:c490

Stanley Leighton Orr Jackson

Former consultant geriatrician Havering and Brentwood Hospitals, Essex (b 1923; q Guy's Hospital, London, 1947; MD, FRCP), died from heart failure on 18 October 2009. Stanley Leighton Orr Jackson began postgraduate training in pathology at Central Middlesex Hospital. But, having contracted tuberculosis as a medical student, he switched to chest medicine



at the Brompton Hospital and became a tuberculosis officer at Harefield Hospital in Middlesex. With the decline of tuberculosis, he took a senior registrar post in geriatric medicine at Stoke on Trent. He became consultant for Havering and Brentwood Hospitals in 1963, as well as taking on a huge workload at Thurrock and Basildon Hospitals, and developed a modern geriatric service in south east Essex. Predeceased by his wife, he leaves four sons and a daughter.

Kevin Jackson

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Bernard Vincent Lee

Former medical officer for assessment of attendance and disability allowances Department of Health (b 1929; q Manchester 1953; DLO), died from oesophageal cancer on 2 October 2009. Bernard Vincent Lee first trained in ear, nose, and throat surgery in Manchester, doing national service as a medical officer in the Royal Air Force. After eight years in general practice in Carlisle and working with the blood transfusion service, he became the then youngest regional medical officer in the Department of Health. He was also twice secretary and chairman of Altrincham Medical Society. He shared in his eight children's interests, and spoke fluent Italian, once having a private audience with the Pope. His strong Christian faith was the driving force of his life. He leaves a wife, Barbara; eight children; and 10 grandchildren.

John Scotson

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2010;340:c487

Paul Schleijsen

General practitioner Coldstream, Berwickshire, and Emmen, Netherlands (b 1959; q Nijmegen 1986; MRCGP), d 26 July 2009. After qualifying, Paul Schleijsen came to England in 1987 for a short locum position in Salisbury. He eventually moved with his family to Scotland, where he trained in general practice in Crieff. He was a partner in Coldstream for over 10 years, becoming an active member of Borders Local Health Council Committee. In 2003 he returned to



the Netherlands as a singlehanded general practitioner. Inspired by his UK experience, he helped to organise palliative care in the region and was the driving force behind developing a large multidisciplinary health centre, a project now nearing completion. He died while enjoying a cycle ride near his home. He leaves a wife, Herma, and two daughters.

Martin Hadshar

Gerbo Huisman

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2010;340:c492

William Francis Toomey

Former consultant surgeon Royal Alexandra Infirmary, Paisley (b 1920; q Glasgow 1946; FRCS), died from bronchopneumonia on 24 May 2009. After qualification, William Francis Toomey ("Bill") served in the Royal Air Force as flight lieutenant and later deputy senior medical officer in Lincolnshire. After returning to Glasgow as registrar, he was



appointed consultant in Paisley in 1956, where he remained until his retirement in 1985. Bill published widely, with a reputation as a meticulous surgeon, and was a respected trainer and honorary clinical professor. He was an active member of the West of Scotland Surgical Association and the Livingstone Surgical Club and fellow of the Association of Surgeons of Great Britain and Ireland. He leaves Muriel, his wife of 62 years; two children; and two grandsons.

David P Crampsey

Alan D Toomey

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