

David Morrell

Primary care pioneer and former BMA president

David Cameron Morrell, general practitioner (b 1929; q St Mary's, London, 1953), died on 19 March 2012.

David Morrell was the first academic general practitioner to become president of the BMA. He concluded his presidential address in 1994 by challenging the BMA to “lead us out of the mire of market place medicine to the high ground of professional medical care”—a prescient, almost prophetic comment, perhaps containing the key to the enormous impact that David made on all aspects of academic primary care. He had been able to see how, in the future, general practice would contribute to medical education and research and improve patient care. He may not have been the last, but he was certainly the embodiment of the now almost extinct three stranded clinical academic—clinician, researcher, and teacher. He changed the course of general practice in all three areas.

Practice based research

In 1962, after five years in health service practice in Hoddesdon, Hertfordshire, Morrell moved to the university department of general practice in Edinburgh—the first of its kind in the world, where the first ever professor of general practice, Richard Scott, was appointed. The premises in West Richmond Street contained a normal general practice on the ground floor, with the teaching and research unit in the same building. It was the first of a handful of British practice based departments, where primary care was delivered to the local population by clinical academics. The opportunities for practice based research and the development of undergraduate teaching and postgraduate training were self evident. This was the model of academic general practice that David Morrell brought to St Thomas' Hospital Medical School and the people living around Kennington Road and Lambeth Walk when he came to London in 1967, going on to be appointed Wolfson Professor in 1974.

Another key influence on Morrell was the strong relationship with Walter Holland's department of public health medicine at St Thomas', which provided the methodological underpinnings in epidemiology and health services research, and the academic rigour for the design and conduct of the early research projects.



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Contributions to general practice

Central to Morrell's contribution to general practice was his work on the prevalence of common symptoms in the community, the ways in which people responded to them and whether or not they became patients, and the natural history of minor illness in primary care. His paper on factors influencing the demand for care in the *International Journal of Epidemiology* in 1975 has never been bettered (1975;4:189-95), and his trial of the use of an information booklet to help patients deal with minor illness also stands out as a landmark in primary care research. The quality of the work of Morrell's group quickly became recognised, and Kennington Road began to attract some of the brightest researchers in primary care, a number of whom are now leaders of their profession. Much of his research formed the basis of *Practice*, a comprehensive and innovative clinical textbook jointly edited with Marshall Marinker and Jack Cormack in 1979. Morrell's John Fry Fellowship monograph, “Diagnosis in general practice: art or science?” (www.nuffieldtrust.org.uk/publications/diagnosis-general-practice-art

) challenged the biomedical model of illness and laid the foundations for much of the prognostic research being conducted in primary care today.

He was among the first to grasp the value of general practice as an integral part of undergraduate medical teaching, and developed an exemplary programme of home visits, surgery teaching, and seminars, within which extremely high standards were expected of the practices involved. David was a reflective and challenging teacher. He was responsible for setting up London's first vocational training scheme for general practice and, with Peter Higgins at Guy's, the first master of science course in general practice, in 1986. The Guy's and St Thomas', now King's College London, MSc has run continuously since, and many of its graduates have gone on to academic and clinical leadership positions in the UK and beyond.

Unsurprisingly, David Morrell was one of the founders of the Association of University Teachers of General Practice, now the Society for Academic Primary Care, and was twice its chairman. He was appointed OBE in 1982 in recognition of his services to general practice.

Pilgrimages to Lourdes

Less well known is the Papal Knighthood that Morrell received in the same year, in recognition of his work for sick and disabled people—for many years he was deeply involved in pilgrimages to Lourdes and was appointed chief medical officer responsible for the medical care of the pilgrims. He had a strong Catholic faith, and his requiem mass at St Joseph's Catholic Church, Epsom, was an affecting occasion attended by many friends and colleagues as well as his large family. David was an enthusiastic pipe smoker and loved his garden, which he weeded with unnerving ferocity. He leaves his wife, Joyce, and five children.

Roger Jones

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2012;344:e3227

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