

Alexander Macara

Former BMA chairman who denounced the “infernial bazaar” of the NHS

Alexander Wiseman Macara, public health doctor (b 1932; q 1958, Glasgow), died on 21 June 2012 from cancer.

Alexander (Sandy) Macara, who has died aged 80, was a charismatic medical politician and an internationally renowned public health physician. As the chairman of the BMA council in the 1990s he healed rifts in an organisation demoralised after controversial changes to the NHS. Admirers praised his quiet diplomacy and clear vision, as well as oratorical skills that enabled him to “connect with the soul of the profession and reflect it,” as Jim Appleyard, former treasurer of the BMA, put it. A key figure in European public health, Macara campaigned remorselessly against the tobacco industry.

Leadership and speaking truth to power

Macara became council chair in 1993 in what amounted to a coup against the incumbent, Jeremy Lee-Potter, whose restrained approach with ministers was seen as ineffective. Yet Macara had been a reluctant candidate, recalled his election manager, Edwin Borman, then the chairperson of the Junior Doctors Committee. “Sandy did a lot of soul searching as to whether it was the right thing to do, rather than just expedient or feeding ambition. He had a sense of duty second to none.”

His maiden speech won him a two minute standing ovation. Macara combined an approachable, unassuming manner with authority, impish wit, and a comedian’s sense of timing. His address to the BMA conference the next year, in which he attacked the internal market of the NHS as an “infernial bazaar,” is still widely quoted. Having chaired the BMA’s medical ethics committee for seven years from 1982, and been deputy and then chairman of its representative body from 1987 to 1992, he was well equipped to restore the organisation’s confidence.

“He’d make anybody feel they had his full attention and he was always concerned about people. He knew exactly what he wanted, and he was passionate about the NHS,” said Michael Wilks, BMA vice president.

Macara was unafraid to speak truth to power. He called for tobacco to be made a dangerous drug and dubbed the industry “the merchants of death.” In 2009 he argued that the measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR) vaccine should be compulsory for school age children.

Sandy Macara was born in Irvine, Ayrshire, in 1932. His father was a Church of Scotland minis-



NICK SINCLAIR

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ter, and he was brought up in a large manse with three acres of land, but home felt a public place: “You either got on with everybody or you didn’t survive.” He said of his father, “His world was the parish and his parish was the world. That was a model that I believe I have unconsciously followed.”

A family tradition

Aged 6, Macara spent three months in hospital with paratyphoid fever, acute appendicitis, and whooping cough, and came to idolise the young consultant in charge of his treatment. “He saved my life, I suppose. Tom Anderson went on to be professor of public health and was my mentor when I was a student at Glasgow University. I decided I wanted to be a medical officer of health. It was like being a clergyman. You had your own community . . . I don’t feel that I have let the family tradition down.”

Though he did not attend school regularly until he was 12, he became the top pupil, and though he had stammered as a teenager, he

became a star of the university debating society. He also took part in Tory politics, though he ceased being active before he was 30 and left the party when it deserted its one nation tradition. The Conservatives were, “the sensible, middle of the road, worthy types of citizen,” he said, while local Labour politicians seemed “bitter people.” He told an interviewer in 1994, “It is only now that I can understand the bitterness.”

After graduating in 1958 Macara worked in Glasgow teaching hospitals and gained general practice experience in Glasgow and London. He witnessed deprivation and neglect in the slums, and the public health problems afflicting dockers and miners. As a junior doctor he organised a march and a hunger strike to protest against the quality of food and residential accommodation.

Macara took a doctorate in public health at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine in 1960, then became Bristol’s assistant medical officer of health and honorary community physician. He lectured at Bristol University from 1963 to 1976, when he was appointed consultant senior lecturer in epidemiology and public health medicine and honorary visiting consultant to Bristol Royal Infirmary, retiring in 1997. He was a consultant to the World Health Organization for more than 20 years and an elected member of the General Medical Council from 1979 to 2002. He was chairman and then president of the National Heart Forum for 13 years until his death.

He was founding secretary general of the World Federation for Education and Research in Public Health and secretary general of the Association of Schools of Public Health in the European Region. Macara was honoured by many international medical schools and health organisations, and he received a knighthood in 1998.

Outside medicine he focused on his family, garden, and religion. He was a freemason and an elder at his local united reformed church in Bristol. He leaves his wife, Sylvia, and their two children.

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- Head to head: Should doctors advocate snus and other nicotine replacements? (*BMJ* 2008;336:359)
- Letter: Time for food industry to adopt signposting model (*BMJ* 2006;332:549.1)
- Letter: The GMC: expediency before principle (*BMJ* 2005;330:252.4)