

# Thomas Szasz

Psychiatrist who criticised his specialty and opposed coercion

**Thomas Szasz, psychiatrist (b 1920; q 1944, University of Cincinnati), died on 8 September 2012, after falling at home**

In 1964, Szasz had the honour of being invited to speak at the 120th annual meeting of the American Psychiatric Association in Los Angeles. It was his first invitation to speak to the group—and his last.

Szasz was not on good terms with the association. In 1961 he had published a book attacking the specialty, *The Myth of Mental Illness: Foundations of a Theory of Personal Conduct*. He argued that so called mental illnesses are not diseases but instead are simply “problems in living” that might include “undesirable thoughts, feelings, and behaviours.” He called psychiatry a pseudoscience “in the company of alchemy and astrology.”

## Not amused

The psychiatry establishment was not amused, viewing the book and Szasz’s subsequent attacks as a declaration of war. At the 1964 meeting, Szasz outlined his controversial ideas. But six other psychiatrists had been invited to read papers denouncing Szasz’s ideas, including Henry Davidson, whose paper was entitled “The New War on Psychiatry.”<sup>1</sup> Some felt the proceedings had the feel of a public heresy trial.

“Tom had a natural inclination to question if not defy authority,” says Jeffrey A Schaler of American University in Washington. But Schaler, who operates a website dedicated to Szasz’s work ([www.szasz.com](http://www.szasz.com)), says Szasz was not opposed to psychiatry. “He believed in psychiatry between consenting adults. Tom did not want coercion to exist. He was anti-coercion, not anti-psychiatrist.”

Szasz opposed involuntary psychiatric treatment, drug treatments for mental disorders, and using insanity as a defence in crimes. “I am probably the only psychiatrist in the world whose hands are clean,” Szasz once said. “I have never committed anyone. I have never given electric shock. I have never, ever, given drugs to a mental patient.”

Throughout his life Szasz remained a vocal critic of psychiatry, lecturing widely and writing 35 books and hundreds of papers, including one in the *BMJ*.<sup>2</sup> He was a hero to patient advocates around the world, while critics argued that science had proved that some mental illnesses had genetic or chemical roots.

“He influenced major aspects of psychiatry,” says Mantosh Dewan, a protégé of Szasz at Upstate Medical University in Syracuse, New York, and later chairman of the psychiatry department. “Even if psychiatry did not embrace the ‘myth of mental illness,’ Tom did force an uncomfortable focus on the arbitrariness of psychiatric diagnoses. In the 1960s his views influenced de-institutionalisation, with the discharge—freeing—of tens of thousands of patients.”

Dewan adds: “He raised awareness of the use of psychiatric diagnoses for social and political control, abuses that are much easier to see in ‘enemy’ countries such as the old Soviet Union.”

Thomas Stephen Szasz was born in Budapest, Hungary, on 15 April 1920. His father was a lawyer. In 1938, on the eve of the second world war, the family moved to the United States. Szasz studied at the University of Cincinnati, first earning a physics degree and then a medical degree in 1944. After a psychiatry residency at the University of Chicago he trained at the Chicago Institute for Psychoanalysis and became a staff +member.

**He felt that freedom was more important than health, and that psychiatry used the language of health to curtail freedom**

## A popular lecturer

In 1956, after two years of military service at the US Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland, he joined Upstate Medical University. His lectures were lively and well attended, and Szasz quickly became the department’s most popular teacher. A quarter of new residents specifically chose Upstate to study with him.

But by the late 1950s he already was attracting, from the department’s perspective, unwanted attention for his controversial views on psychiatry, which had social, political, and ideological undertones. His second book—*Law, Liberty and Psychiatry: An Inquiry into the Social Uses of Mental Health Practices*—was the first to use the term “the therapeutic state,” a union of government and medicine. State of New York health officials contacted Upstate officials and wanted Szasz fired, but they lacked authority to do so.

In 1969 Szasz collaborated with the Church of Scientology to found the Citizens Commission on Human Rights, which opposed psychiatric treatments. He never became a Scientology member, but the association damaged his credibility and he later distanced himself from the group. Despite all the controversies and tensions within the department, Szasz remained personally popular until retirement in 1990.

“He was the quintessential old-fashioned European gentleman: warm, gentle, gracious, and charming,” says Dewan. “Although he held very strong views and vigorously promoted them, he was supportive and generous in allowing his students and colleagues to find their own path.”

In 2010, Szasz was invited to give a keynote address at the International Congress of the Royal College of Psychiatrists to honour the 50th Anniversary edition of his first book, *The Myth of Mental Illness*. At the podium, the 90 year old man quipped: “It’s unimaginable that the American Psychiatric Association would have done this.”

Joanna Moncrieff of University College London was there. “The room was full to overflowing,” she says. “In his talk he started by saying that the thing that had motivated him above all was a love of freedom, one that was fostered through his experiences of Nazi Europe. He felt that freedom was more important than health, and that psychiatry used the language of health to curtail freedom.”

Szasz leaves two daughters, a brother, and a grandson.

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References are in the version on [bmj.com](http://bmj.com).

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## David Wilson Barron



**Former consultant anaesthetist Musgrave Park and Royal Victoria Hospitals, Belfast (b 1925; q Belfast 1948; MD, PhD, FFARCS); d 13 June 2012.**

David Wilson Barron's main clinical interest was the care of patients requiring major surgery, and he gave many years of service to the orthopaedic centre at Musgrave Park Hospital, where he established efficient preoperative assessment and high dependency units. He developed improved anaesthetic techniques, such as the use of epidural morphine, and his 1982 textbook *Anaesthesia and Related Subjects in Orthopaedic Surgery* was well received. Always interested in newer intravenous anaesthetic agents, he published several papers on the clinical pharmacology of the barbiturates. A keen golfer and knowledgeable gardener, he had a close, lifelong relationship with his church. He leaves his wife, Marion; two sons; two daughters; and 12 grandchildren. Gerald Black

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## William Geoffrey Canning

**General practitioner Scarisbrick, West Lancashire (b 1919; q Liverpool 1943), died from coronary heart disease on 22 August 2012.**

William Geoffrey Canning ("Geoff") joined the Royal Army Medical Corps and took out a short service regular commission. He was posted to India and worked with the 17th British General Hospital, 80th Parachute Field Ambulance, and the 1st Battalion of the Royal Scots regiment. He later set up a single handed practice in Stoneycroft, Liverpool, and on reaching retirement age undertook locums and worked as a paid assistant in a large practice in Kirkby. He finally retired at age 77 and managed to catch up with a little oil painting. He

leaves his wife, six children, and four grandchildren.

Judy Canning-Glass

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## Eric Frankel

**Former consultant physician Wanstead Hospital (b 1913; q St George's Hospital Medical School 1938; MD, FRCP), died from bronchopneumonia on 8 November 2011.**

Eric Frankel came to London from his native Hamburg in Germany in 1933 to study medicine. At the outbreak of war, while working at Old Church Hospital in Romford, he was arrested as a national of the enemy and imprisoned in Canada. Following a petition for his release he returned to London to marry Constance and then joined the British Army, serving in the Royal Army Medical Corps, where he achieved the rank of major. After peace was declared he remained in Palestine, working in local public health until the NHS was established.



He was appointed as a consultant physician at Wanstead Hospital, London, where he remained until he retired. He leaves two sons, six grandchildren, and five great grandchildren.

Conor Ramsden

[Cite this as: \*BMJ\* 2012;345:e6773](#)

## Peter Kenneth Philip Harvey

**Former consultant neurologist Royal Free and Chase Farm Hospitals; emeritus consultant neurologist Royal Free London NHS Foundation Trust; honorary clinical senior lecturer University College London Medical School (b 1942; q Cambridge/London 1966; MRCS, FRCP), d 3 August 2012.**

Peter Kenneth Philip Harvey trained at the Middlesex Hospital and the National Hospital in Queen Square before being appointed consultant neurologist to the Whittington and Chase Farm hospitals. He moved to the Royal Free Hospital in 1978, where he served as medical

director for a time. An outstanding neurology teacher, he did much to dispel the "neurophobia" of generations of medical students and junior doctors. Lately, he endured the increasing difficulties of diabetes and chronic renal disease with energy and courage, coping seemingly uncomplainingly with home peritoneal dialysis and working until shortly before his sudden death. He leaves his wife, Lesley, and their three children.

Steve Pollock

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## David Schofield Jeffery



**Former general practitioner (b 1921, q Cambridge 1952; DOBst RCOG), d 22 April 2012.**

In 1940, David Schofield Jeffery requested deferred entry to study engineering in order to serve during the second world war with the Friends Relief Service, equipping evacuation hostels in Birmingham and working in a camp for displaced persons in Brunswick, Germany, in 1945. After the war, he transferred to medicine and, after qualifying, pursued his vocation as a family doctor in Old Windsor and Englefield Green. David and his wife Marion moved to Devon. David's general practice colleagues were reunited last year at his 90th birthday celebration. He leaves Marion, three children, and four grandchildren.

Robert Jeffery

[Cite this as: \*BMJ\* 2012;345:e6314](#)

## Alexander Fitzroy Maclean

**Former general practitioner (b 1939; q Aberdeen 1965; DOBst RCOG, MRCP), died from metastatic oesophageal cancer on 12 January 2012.**

Alexander Fitzroy Maclean ("Big Roy") started studying veterinary medicine in Glasgow before starting his medical course in 1960. After graduating in 1965 he married Rita, his lifelong partner. After house jobs in Aberdeen



he joined Banchory Group Practice, some 20 miles inland, and became part of the transformation of a tranquil riverside village to a bustling commuter town with the advent of the oil industry to the northeast of Scotland. By 1977 Roy was senior partner, and in 1990 Banchory became a lead fundholding practice, which generated a marked increase in administrative activity. He retired in 1997 and enjoyed locum work for a few years. He leaves Rita, three children, and five grandchildren.

George H Mennie

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## John M Tomlinson

**Former general practitioner Alton (b 1934; q Middlesex Hospital, London 1959; FRCGP), died from a ruptured aortic aneurysm on 11 June 2012.**



John M Tomlinson joined a general practice in Chester in 1961 but left for Alton in 1969. He helped set up a new health centre, which opened in 1974 and housed doctors and other health professionals under one roof. Medical students were welcomed. John also lectured at three universities, pioneered modern teaching techniques, and published widely. After retiring he set up the men's health clinic in Winchester Hospital, worked a medical charity for sexual health, and helped underprivileged children in east London into medical careers. John was a catalyst for change, initiating new projects and using creative ideas and the skilful management of people and resources. He leaves his wife, Pat; their four children; and eight grandchildren. Pat Tomlinson

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