

# Rodney Sweetnam

Orthopaedic surgeon who championed alternative treatments to limb amputation

Sir David Rodney Sweetnam, consultant orthopaedic surgeon (b 1927; q Cambridge 1950; KCVO, CBE), died from a retroperitoneal sarcoma on 17 May 2013.

The first thing Sir Rodney Sweetnam would do when he came home after a day's work was to polish his shoes, followed by a session of letter writing to colleagues and former juniors. He followed his former students' careers with interest and would always write if one of them got an important new position or had performed a particularly noteworthy operation. The handwritten notes would contain words of encouragement, praise, congratulations, or even commiserations, which became important mementoes for the recipients.

Tim Briggs, consultant orthopaedic surgeon at the Royal National Orthopaedic Hospital in Stanmore, Middlesex, treasures the half dozen or so letters that his former boss wrote to him on occasions such as his appointment as medical director.

"The letters were always well written and written with pride and feeling. I have kept all of them," he says.

Sweetnam trained as an orthopaedic surgeon and developed an interest in bone tumours, particularly osteosarcoma, which typically affects the lower femur. At the beginning of his career in the 1950s, the only treatment was immediate amputation, even if there was no prospect of the patient surviving.

With his senior colleague, Sir Stanford Cade, Sweetnam showed that radiotherapy followed by amputation six months later, if no metastases were detected, was just as effective as immediate amputation.<sup>1</sup>

Sweetnam then built on this work with John Scales, professor of bioengineering at the Royal National Orthopaedic Hospital, with whom he developed custom-made metal prostheses to fit around the hip, shoulder, knee, and even the pelvis. This, combined with the advent of modern chemotherapy, helped to improve both mortality and quality of life among patients.

He also replaced sections of the bone with a bone graft, often transplanted with its blood supply from an adjacent part of the body. By the time he retired, fewer than one in five of his patients faced amputation of the limb.<sup>2</sup>

Sweetnam was born into a medical family in 1927: his father was a general practitioner in Wimbledon, southwest London, and his mother also studied medicine but did not practise. He



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went to Clayesmore School in Dorset and then read natural sciences at Peterhouse College, Cambridge, graduating with a double first. He then went to Middlesex Hospital in London to study clinical medicine, followed by two years' national service on the battleship *HMS Vanguard*. According to his son David, also an orthopaedic surgeon, he thought this period—mainly spent treating sailors for venereal disease—was a waste of time.

He did a short stint in general practice but then decided to pursue surgery as a specialty and returned to Middlesex Hospital, where he was appointed consultant orthopaedic surgeon in 1960. When he arrived at the hospital, orthopaedic surgery was still developing as a specialty, spurred on by developments in surgery during the second world war. The Middlesex was at the heart of this, and Sweetnam—along with Philip Newman—built the department into one of the leading orthopaedic units in the country.

It was at Middlesex Hospital that Sweetnam met his wife, Pat, who was a sister in the fracture clinic. He loved the hospital's tight knit community and was unhappy when it merged with University College Hospital shortly before his retirement. His fears that the smaller Middlesex would be swallowed by its bigger neighbour were borne out, and he was also unhappy that his unit, whose good reputation he had worked so hard to assure, became a branch of another.

Between 1982 and 1992, he was orthopaedic surgeon to the royal family—a position of which he was immensely proud, says his son—but he was very discreet, giving little away about his work.

Michael Edgar, who ran the orthopaedic unit at Middlesex Hospital with Sweetnam for nearly 20 years, says that this discretion was characteristic of a man who was incredibly modest.

Medicopolitics also played an important part in his life, and after serving as president of the British Orthopaedic Association, he was elected to the council of the Royal College of Surgeons, becoming its president in 1995. He was a skilful chairman, prized for his quick thinking, charm, and punctuality in keeping meetings to time. The last months of his tenure in 1998 were marked by the Bristol heart scandal, when Sweetnam was forced to defend his profession to the hostile media after the high death rates of a paediatric cardiac surgery unit in Bristol had been exposed.

Frank Dobson, then health secretary, criticised the General Medical Council for allowing one of the three doctors involved in the case to remain on the medical register and only striking off the two who were already retired. Sweetnam denied accusations of closing ranks when he said that he was "surprised" at Dobson's intervention and that he supported the council's decision in a case that, at eight months, was the longest in its history.

While never losing his cool, Sweetnam found this brush with the national media and the machinations of politicians a bruising experience. Thereafter, college presidents received media training.

He leaves his wife, Pat; a son; and a daughter.

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

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## Donald Andrew Aitken



**Former consultant obstetrician and gynaecologist Nether Edge Hospital, Sheffield (b 1930; q Aberdeen; DOBst, FRCOG), died from metastatic prostate cancer and Alzheimer's disease on 28 May 2013.**

After graduating and doing national service, Donald Andrew Aitken worked as a house officer in surgery and gynaecology at Hammersmith Hospital before returning in 1959 to Aberdeen teaching hospitals as a registrar in obstetrics and gynaecology. In 1963 he became senior registrar at United Sheffield Hospitals before being appointed as sole consultant at Nether Edge Hospital in 1967. He was an active member of the BMA and became a fellow in 1988. He retired in 1991 when Nether Edge Hospital closed down. Donald was a keen mountaineer in his student days and climbed Switzerland's Matterhorn and all the Munros in Scotland, among others. He leaves his wife, Muriel; two daughters; and three granddaughters.

**Muriel Aitken**

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## James Bryden Blacklay

**Former ENT surgeon (b 1921; q London Hospital, Whitechapel, 1943; FRCS Eng, DLO Eng), d 5 March 2013.**

James Bryden Blacklay was appointed ENT consultant surgeon to South East Kent hospitals in 1957 and remained in post until his retirement in 1981. He was much admired for his surgical skill, enthusiasm, kindness to all, and sense of humour. He was secretary to the local medical committee for many years during this time. He was also a keen believer in rural self sufficiency, well before it was fashionable, and, applying some of his surgical and medical knowledge, singlehandedly managed his smallholding of sheep, hens, ducks, geese, bees, cats, dogs,

pony, and a very productive vineyard and vegetable garden. Predeceased by his wife of 62 years, he leaves two daughters, six grandchildren, and one great grandchild.

**Harriet Blacklay**

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## Peter Driscoll Booker



**Consultant paediatric anaesthetist Liverpool (b 1950; q London 1974; FRCA, MD), died from metastatic renal cell carcinoma on 19 May 2013.**

Peter Driscoll Booker was an expert paediatric cardiac anaesthetist through an era of great increases in the complexity of work undertaken, and ever greater scrutiny of such work. He was a superb clinician, famed for his speed, precision, and dry humour. He coedited the 2005 textbook *Pediatric Cardiac Anesthesia*. Born in Devon and qualified from London Hospital Medical School, he was appointed as a consultant in Liverpool in 1982. He was senior lecturer in paediatric anaesthesia at the University of Liverpool between 1992 and 2005. In addition to carrying out clinical research, he set up and ran successful postgraduate courses and was an examiner for the FRCA examinations. He leaves his wife, Holly; a son from his first marriage; two daughters; and grandchildren.

**Frank Potter**

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## Brian Cogan



**General practitioner Fenham, Newcastle upon Tyne (b 1950; q Cork 1977), died from complications of diabetes on 26 March 2013.**

After his house jobs, Brian Cogan joined the northeast vocational training scheme and settled in practice in the west end of Newcastle in a deprived part of town. He became an advocate for his patients, trebling his list size and establishing new premises during his time as senior. At the time of his sudden and unexpected demise he indicated that he had no thoughts of retirement and continued to be enthusiastic about clinical issues, as well as having a vocal interest in current NHS changes. In recent years he had developed an increasing interest in occupational health. He enjoyed golf, followed the Ireland rugby team, and took pride in his family. His zest for life was an inspiration right to the end. He leaves a son and a daughter.

**John Kimmitt**

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## William Douglas Elliot

**Consultant paediatrician (b 1925; q Edinburgh 1948; FRCPE), died from lung cancer on 13 April 2013.**

William Douglas Elliot ("Pat") was appointed as the first paediatrician at Preston Hospital, North Shields, where he spent 28 years. He took an interest in the social as well as physical aspects of children and built strong links with social services and child psychiatry. His teaching of medical students and junior doctors was of the highest order. A gadget man, he was an early adopter of computers and of data collection as a means of reviewing and evaluating what was happening on the wards and in clinics. Gardening was a passion, as was photography, and he photographed and catalogued on his computer almost 500 plants in his garden at Cramlington Hall. Pat leaves his second wife, Joan; two children from his first marriage; and three grandchildren.

**Neela Shabde, Alan Craft**

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## John Raymond Mikhail

**Former consultant chest physician (b 1923; q Middlesex Hospital 1946; MRCS Eng), d 29 November 2012.**

John Raymond Mikhail trained in thoracic medicine but then took over his late father's general practice for



a while before returning to chest medicine. He became a consultant chest physician at the Central Middlesex and Willesden chest clinics before moving to the Royal National Hospital in Bournemouth and the Royal Victoria Hospital in Boscombe from 1975 until he retired in 1988. His particular interest was in tuberculosis, and he published papers on this and other aspects of thoracic medicine. He was active in the British Thoracic Association. Despite increasing frailty from Parkinson's disease in his later years he was still able to get up to see Arsenal Football Club and even managed a trip to the London Olympics. Predeceased by his wife, Georgina, he leaves a son, Chris, and a daughter, Caroline.

**Tim Battcock**

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## Paul Harald Osterberg

**Former consultant orthopaedic surgeon Royal Victoria Hospital Belfast, Musgrave Park Hospital, and Northern Ireland Orthopaedic Service (b 1926; q Trinity College Dublin 1953; FRCSI, FRCS Eng), died from cancer on 25 June 2013.**

Born in Copenhagen, Paul Harald Osterberg spent his early years in New York. He did his surgical training in Dublin, London, and Belfast and specialised in orthopaedics at London's Royal National Orthopaedic Hospital. He was appointed a consultant in 1965 and became professor at Pahlavi University, Iran, in 1976. As a generalist he was happily settled in Ulster but less comfortable with increasing subspecialisation. Perhaps because of his origins, he found manual occupations such as surgery, gardening, and sailing more satisfying. He also enjoyed the communicative personal side of medicine. He leaves two daughters and four grandsons.

**Piers Milner**

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