

# Noel Olsen

Public health consultant and a formidable campaigner against the tobacco industry

**Noel Olsen (b 1946; q St George's Hospital Medical School 1969; Hon DH, MSc, FRCP, FFPHM), died on 2 September 2013 from prostate cancer.**

Even for an individual with an unusual amount of energy, “retiring” as a consultant physician at the age of 30 to retrain in public health might be seen as excessive.

The tobacco and alcohol industries, together with sundry ministers and policymakers, might have wished Noel Olsen had remained in the relative obscurity of respiratory medicine in a hospital on London's deprived eastern fringes.

After becoming one of the NHS's youngest consultants Olsen swiftly became frustrated at the relative ineffectiveness of treatment for the mostly poor patients he was treating for lung cancer. Recognising that prevention was better than cure when it came to combatting this and many other diseases, he embraced the nascent campaigning group Action on Smoking and Health (ASH) in the mid 1970s. He then resigned as a chest physician to retrain as a public health physician.

Olsen went on to hold senior NHS public health roles in Cambridge, London, and Plymouth, while serving on a multitude of government, British Medical Association, and research committees or advisory bodies.

These roles, together with his energetic and creative campaigning and lobbying, earned him the Royal Society for Public Health's first gold medal in 2008.

Tributes to Olsen have typically spoken of his great energy born of his passion, and the creative spark he provided to campaigns for a regulatory assault on the tobacco industry. Professor Mike Daube, ASH's first director and a friend of Olsen's for 40 years, describes him as “a Catherine wheel of ideas.”

Daube is not the only former colleague and admirer to acknowledge that many of those ideas were unworkable. Other ideas, however, became significant weapons in the armour of the anti-smoking lobby and other public health campaigners. Olsen's tactics included buying shares in British American Tobacco (BAT) so he could ask awkward questions at shareholder meetings, and providing MPs with statistics on smoking related deaths in their constituencies.



**“He saw people dying both from poverty and from a lack of information (about healthy lifestyles) and he got incensed by the injustice of that”**

Speaking at his friend's memorial service, Daube ended his tribute with a quote from an internal BAT memo released as a result of the lawsuits brought against the tobacco industry. Authored by a senior BAT executive, it described a meeting with Olsen as “a somewhat one sided conversation,” and warned that “Dr Olsen seemed to be a remarkably able and intelligent troublemaker.”

Olsen was to serve as honorary secretary of ASH for more than 20 years, while playing an international role in the fight against the tobacco industry. As an elected member of the BMA's council, its executive board, and its board of science, he helped shape the association's approach to public health.

Daube observed that “tact was not (Olsen's) strong point,” but that most people agreed that he largely reserved his ire for those in power, or in the tobacco and alcohol industry. Indeed, Olsen is also said to have deployed an emollient charm to win support for his ideas or initiatives.

Professor Brian Kirby, who worked with Olsen as a trustee for many years at the National Heart Forum (now the UK Health Forum), says, “He would be quite outspoken but in a very nice way. He was a very good conversationalist who would use quotations or an amusing anecdote to disarm people. He

could wrong-foot people who disagreed with him because suddenly they would both be laughing.”

Given Olsen's comfortable upbringing in Hampstead and his education at a nearby fee-paying school, it appears professional contact with poverty sparked his public health passion.

Kirby says Olsen's father resigned as an accountant for an asbestos company in London's East End after it denied a link between its product and the tumours suffered by many of its largely female workforce. His father's influence, Kirby suggests, would have been reinforced by the stream of lung cancer and respiratory patients living in poverty that Olsen saw every day while working as a chest physician in east London.

Alan Maryon-Davis, former head of health sciences at the now defunct Health Education Council, says, “He saw people dying both from poverty and from a lack of information (about healthy lifestyles) and he got incensed by the injustice of that.”

Daube says, “In many ways him being such an establishment figure made him a more effective campaigner because he was not a huge radical—his favourite haunt in London was the Royal Ocean Racing Club and he crewed for (former prime minister, Sir Edward) Heath on (Heath's yacht) *Morning Cloud*. He looked and sounded so establishment—that was a strength as a campaigner.”

Although he retained his interest in tobacco control, he later had a prominent role in the work of Alcohol Concern, chaired the Alcohol Education and Research Council (now the Alcohol Research Council), was a government adviser on fuel poverty and other public health issues, and supported the Fuel Poverty Action Group.

He taught public health to medical students, and was later involved in the development of the University of Plymouth and the Peninsula Medical School. He inspected medical schools for the General Medical Council, and was also an early advocate of medical audit.

He leaves his wife, Nicky Tewson; and daughters, Suzanne and Sally, who have both followed him into medicine.

Chris Mahony, London  
chris.mahony@cjmedia.biz  
Cite this as: *BMJ* 2013;347:f6086

**Margaret Grace Anderson**



**Former senior clinical medical officer North Dorset (b 1931; q London 1954; FFCM; FFPHM), died from heart failure on 25 August 2013.**

Margaret Grace Anderson (“Maggie”) first worked in general practice but soon followed her husband, Alistair, whose military career took them to Germany and the Far East, where she worked as a GP for army and Royal Air Force families. She took a diploma in public health at the University of Singapore in 1969 and, on returning to the UK, specialised in paediatric community medicine. In 1975 she was appointed senior clinical medical officer for the West Dorset health district. She was elected to the BMA central committee for community medicine and community health from 1981 to 1987, and served on the BMA Council, representing community medical officers, between 1982 and 1986. Maggie leaves Alistair; their children David, Fiona, and Katy; six grandchildren; and two great grandsons.

**Fiona Anderson**

*Cite this as: BMJ 2013;347:f6440*

**Pamela Eileen Aylett**



**Former consultant psychiatrist (b 1921; q London Royal Free Hospital School of Medicine for women 1947; PhD, FRCPsych), d 4 October 2012.**

After working at the Department of Health, Pamela Eileen Aylett (née Warner) trained in psychiatry at Guy’s Hospital and was appointed consultant psychiatrist at Westminster Hospital

during the 1970s. Specialising in drug addiction, she was a pioneer of harm reduction, providing addicts with needles and syringes to prevent the spread of hepatitis B and later HIV/Aids. In the 1980s the Westminster drug clinic moved to St Stephen’s Hospital on the Fulham Road. There she was involved in a pioneering study using community based detoxification. A lifelong Labour supporter and former Labour councillor, she was a staunch supporter of the NHS and championed a society based on equality and compassion for others. She leaves her husband, Peter, and four children, nine grandchildren, and three great grandchildren.

**Sarah Aylett**

*Cite this as: BMJ 2013;347:f6432*

**Enda Casement**



**Former consultant psychiatrist and medical superintendent, Holywell Hospital, Antrim (b 1922; q Belfast 1945; OBE, DPM RCPSI, FRCP, FRCPsych), died from complications of dementia on 17 November 2012.**

Enda Casement was initially bound on a career in neurosurgery but contracted tuberculosis. A year in Lausanne restored his health. He decided to go into psychiatry and was appointed consultant psychiatrist to Antrim’s Holywell Hospital in 1960. As medical superintendent he fought tirelessly for the expansion of psychiatric services and for this he was awarded the OBE in 1977. He was a gentle cultured man, loved by all who knew him. Enda Casement leaves his wife, Suzanne.

**Maire Casement**

*Cite this as: BMJ 2013;347:f6433*

**Christine Elizabeth Jones**

**General practitioner Workington, Cumbria (b 1952; q Liverpool 1975), died from motor neurone disease on 25 August 2013.**

After hospital posts in Liverpool, Great Yarmouth, and Cumbria, Christine



Elizabeth Cain married Stephen and joined James Street Medical Practice in Workington. She was senior partner when she had to retire early after 32 years of dedicated service to her patients. She diagnosed her own motor neurone disease in early 2011 and had to take early retirement in September 2011. Christine coped with her illness with characteristic courage and determination. She was nursed by her family and supported by her own medical and nursing colleagues. Her strong Christian faith helped her throughout her life. She leaves Stephen and their four children.

**Elizabeth Needham, Myra Holbrook, Stephen Jones**

*Cite this as: BMJ 2013;347:f6434*

**John Warburton Thompson**



**Former professor of pharmacology Newcastle upon Tyne; consultant Pain Relief Clinic Royal Victoria Infirmary; emeritus professor and consultant in pharmacology, University of Newcastle upon Tyne (b 1924; q Royal London Hospital and University of London; 1948; PhD Lond, FRCP Lond, Dip Med Acupunc), died from a likely chest infection exacerbating lung fibrosis on 27 November 2012.**

John Warburton Thompson was appointed professor of pharmacology at Newcastle University, where he founded the department of pharmacological sciences, and he was a consultant clinical pharmacologist at the Royal Victoria Infirmary at Newcastle. Some of his research included work on the actions of psychotropic drugs—including benzodiazepines, nicotine, and

cannabis—on human EEG responses. After retirement from University and NHS life he was appointed director of medical studies at St Oswald’s Hospice, Newcastle, and continued his pain medicine private practice. He leaves his wife, Judith; two children; and three grandchildren.

**Georgina Thompson**

*Cite this as: BMJ 2013;347:f6439*

**Cynthia Ruth Woodhall**



**Consultant paediatrician Whiston Hospital, Prescot (b 1947; q Manchester 1971; FRCP (UK), FRCPCH), d 21 March, 2013.**

Cynthia Ruth Woodhall was appointed to Whiston Hospital in 1986 to augment a team of two consultants. By then she had gained much experience in general paediatrics and neonates; with additional important experience in child and adolescent psychiatry, respiratory disease, and gastroenterology; with children with special needs; and in child protection. Later she took on children with diabetes, where she has left a lasting legacy. For a few years she took on the responsibility of divisional director of the joint paediatric and obstetric and gynaecology directorate. In addition she acted as a medicolegal expert and gained the respect of the local legal profession. She retired in 2008, to indulge her passions of golf, gardening, and travel. She died suddenly and leaves Steve, her partner of 37 years.

**John Sills, Steve Hill**

*Cite this as: BMJ 2013;347:f5988*

Longer versions are on [bmj.com](http://bmj.com). We are pleased to receive obituary notices. In most cases we will be able to publish only about 100 words in the printed journal, but we can run a fuller version on [bmj.com](http://bmj.com). We will take responsibility for shortening. We do not send proofs. Please give a contact telephone number, and email the obituary to [obituaries@bmj.com](mailto:obituaries@bmj.com)