

# Lorna Wing

Psychiatrist who coined the phrases Asperger's syndrome and autistic spectrum

**Lorna Gladys Wing, psychiatrist (b 1928; q University of London 1952), died from bronchopneumonia, cerebrovascular disease, and dementia on 6 June 2014.**

Lorna Wing first realised that her young daughter, Susie, was not like other children when they were on a train together. Sitting opposite her was a little boy of about the same age, who was pointing at things and engaging with his mother: something Susie, later diagnosed with autism, never did.

"A cold chill came over me, and I was very worried," Wing said in an interview in the *Guardian* in 2011.

At the time of Susie's birth in 1956 to Wing and her husband, John, both psychiatrists, autism was a little known and understood condition. The prevailing view was that it was a social attachment disorder whose roots were in the mother-child relationship. Cold or "refrigerator mothers" were thought to be the cause, and autistic children were taken away from their parents, causing much distress to both parties.

Wing's worries about Susie were confirmed when she attended a lecture given by Mildred Creak, a pioneering child psychiatrist, who in the early 1960s chaired a working party on the diagnosis of autism.

Professor Jeremy Turk, child and adolescent psychiatrist at South London and the Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust and a close colleague of Wing's, said that during this lecture "the penny dropped." "Mildred Creak was describing a condition that was thought to be very rare, and Lorna realised that this was what her daughter, Susie, had. It prompted her to devote her life to this area of work," he says.

In 1964 Wing joined the Medical Research Council Social Psychiatry Research Unit at the Institute of Psychiatry where she was soon joined by Judith Gould, who became a lifelong colleague and friend. Together they worked on the definitive Camberwell study of children and young people with autism spectrum conditions and other associated developmental disabilities, which showed that the condition was much more common than previously thought. The study led to the identification of the triad of impairments associated with people with autism: problems with social communication, social interaction, and social imagination.

She coined the phrase the "autistic spectrum," arguing that autism was not the narrow condition defined by Leo Kanner in 1943. One

of Wing's favourite sayings was: "Nature never draws a line without smudging it," to explain the spectrum.

When Kanner first described autism in the 1940s it was thought to affect around two to four children in every 10 000, compared with around one in 100 children today.<sup>1</sup> Wing was alive to criticisms that her work might lead to overdiagnosis, but she felt that diagnostic rates increased because of improved diagnostic tools. Children and adults with autism had always existed but had been misdiagnosed or neglected, she said.

For Wing, diagnosis was the starting block of developing services and treatment for people with autism, and with Gould she developed the diagnostic interview for social and communication orders (DISCO), a semistructured assessment tool. The DISCO was first developed in the 1970s but has since evolved and is now used all over the world.

Being the mother of a child with autism gave Wing a unique insight into the condition, and with a group of other like-minded parents she helped found the Society for Autistic Children, which went on to become the National Autistic Society. The society initially had three aims: to set up a school for children with autism; to establish a residential service for children leaving school; and to provide an information and advice service.

The charity grew and in 1991 Wing and Gould founded the society's National Autistic Centre for Social and Communication Disorders in Bromley, Kent. It was renamed the Lorna Wing Centre for Autism in 2008, and Gould is now director.

Wing was born in Gillingham, Kent, to Gladys and Bernard Tolchard, a nurse and engineer, respectively. She went to University College Hospital, London, where she met her husband, John. The couple trained as psychiatrists, and John went on to become an eminent social psychiatrist and director of the Medical Research Council unit at the Institute of Psychiatry. John's

specialism was schizophrenia, but he also published a book on autism, *Early Childhood Autism*, in 1967.

John was naturally interested in the condition, but it was Lorna who was the pioneer. She coined the term Asperger's syndrome for people with good intellectual function but debilitating problems in the social, linguistic, and sensory spheres. She was seeing young adults whose symptoms did not accord with the usual mental health disorders of schizophrenia or depression but shared traits with people with autism.

She was an avid reader, a "natural detective," as Gould describes her, and somewhere she came across a paper written in 1944 by Viennese paediatrician Hans Asperger. The paper was translated by John, who knew German, and Wing went on to publish a clinical account in the journal *Psychological Medicine* in 1981.<sup>2</sup> Asperger's syndrome was finally recognised by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* in 1994.

Wing was popular among her colleagues and patients and was a loving and caring clinician. However, she was a scientist first and foremost

and was dismissive of anyone who was fuzzy in their thinking and of non-evidence based "cures" for the condition. One such idea was the "holding technique," which suggested that by holding a child you could get them to leave their cocoon. Wing appeared on a television programme to dismiss the technique, arguing that it could harm children with autism who often hate being touched. History has been kinder to Wing than the programme makers, who portrayed her in a negative light—today the holding technique is completely discredited. "Lorna felt very strongly that parents could easily be duped because of their strong desire to help their children," says Gould.

Susie died in 2005 and John died in 2010.

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References are in the version on the bmj.com.

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**For Lorna Wing, diagnosis was the starting block of developing services and treatment for people with autism**

**Dorothy Cecily Clift**



**Clinical assistant dermatology department, St Bartholomew's Hospital (b 1919; q Leeds 1942), d 20 March 2014**

Dorothy Cecily Clift (née Newell) met Arthur Clift, the surgeon who became her husband, when they worked together at the John Radcliffe in Oxford. They moved to Bromley, Kent, in 1945 and worked for a short time at Farnborough Hospital. Dorothy devoted about 25 years mainly to supporting Arthur and caring for their six children. She then worked for a while in family planning at Penge before moving to be a clinical assistant in the dermatology department at St Bartholomew's Hospital. Throughout her retirement from 1999, Dorothy continued to care for her family and neighbours. She had Parkinson's disease during her final years. Dorothy leaves five of her children, seven grandchildren, and eight great grandchildren.

**Priscilla Alderson**

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**Lindsay Mary Elliott**



**Former general practitioner and public health specialist (b 1926; q Royal London Hospital 1953; FFCM), died from hepatocellular carcinoma on 26 February 2014.**

Lindsay Mary Elliott set up an innovative "Hospital at Home" scheme more than 30 years ago. With two senior medical officers in the care of the elderly department she brought together hospital and primary care services and facilitated the collaboration of community care with both hospital consultants and nursing services. For

many years she gave medical advice on housing and environmental health issues to three local authorities in the health district. After retiring Lindsay continued to live in the extension to her farm house, where her younger son and daughter in law resided. She enjoyed her progress in poetry and art, and she continued to be the centre of the family. She leaves her husband, Roger Williams; four children; and 10 grandchildren.

**Deborah Williams**

[Cite this as: BMJ 2014;349:g4728](#)

**Dennis Henry Fox**



**Former general practitioner (b 1928; q Bristol University 1951; MBE, MRCS), d 4 June 2014.**

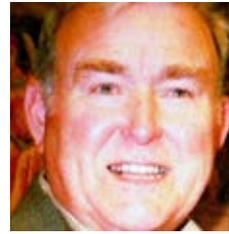
Dennis Henry Fox worked as a general practitioner in south Gloucestershire for 34 years. He was also a visiting medical officer for Hortham and Brentry Hospital for 19 years. After retiring he was a non-executive director of Frenchay Health Authority for six years. He was active in local government for 30 years, served as governor at various educational institutions, chaired the district youth committee, and worked as divisional surgeon to St John Ambulance. In 1983 he received his MBE for services to local government. He was appointed honorary alderman in the district of Northavon in 1991. Fox was a committed Christian, and a lay preacher and organist at several Baptist churches for more than 40 years. Married to Pamela for over 61 years, he had three children, seven grandchildren, and eight great grandchildren.

**Elizabeth P Fox**

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**Joseph Edward Gordon**

**Former general practitioner Wideopen, Northumberland (b 1933; q Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons, Dublin, Ireland, 1959), died from respiratory failure after pulmonary lobotomy on 19 June 2013.**



Joseph Edward Gordon ("Joe") was prominent in the medical political scene in north Tyneside for a quarter of a century. He was active in advocating positive policy change and was in the vanguard in promoting policy change in cervical cytology through the local medical committees' conference and the annual BMA annual representatives' meeting. Joe had joined his father's practice in 1962. Wideopen, Seaton Burn, and Dudley were mining areas, and a large housing estate was under construction. The practice grew dramatically, and Joe's father and I were grateful for an extra pair of hands, as we were a practice dedicated to the NHS and patient care. Joe retired in 1993. He leaves his wife, Ann; two children; and four grandchildren.

**Tom McKenzie**

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**Alexander Macdonald**



**Former general practitioner (b 1924; q 1946), died from primary pulmonary fibroses on 20 May 2014.**

Alexander Macdonald was born in Glasgow and studied chemistry and medicine at the University of Glasgow. After his national service with the Royal Army Medical Corps in Germany, he moved to Bowmore, Islay, where he took over a medical practice and worked there until retiring at the age of 65. His late wife, Margaret Macdonald, who was also a doctor, worked with him at the practice, and in their retirement they travelled to India to volunteer at a mission hospital in Bangalore. They both enjoyed practising medicine. Margaret predeceased him by five years.

Macdonald leaves three children and seven grandchildren.

**Ian Macdonald**

[Cite this as: BMJ 2014;349:g5091](#)

**Alan Theodore Smyth**



**Former general practitioner Hampton-in-Arden, Warwickshire (b 1926; q Birmingham 1952), died from complications of metastatic squamous cell carcinoma of the scalp on 2 April 2014.**

Alan Theodore Smyth joined the general practice at Meriden in 1954, developing a surgery at Hampton-in-Arden, while also working as a clinical assistant in elderly care at Solihull Hospital. Alan retired in 1988, after giving 34 years of service to the local community—as chairman of the parish council, local church warden, and founder member of the Hampton Singers. Outside medicine and his family, his main interests were railways and music. Alan travelled widely to see specific steam engines and documented the electrification of the West Coast Main Line as it passed through Hampton. Having been born in Malvern, he loved the music of Edward Elgar, but he also enjoyed listening to most forms of classical music. He leaves his wife, Ursula; three children; five grandchildren; and three great grandchildren.

**Rodger Charlton, Roger Shinton, Keith Shinton**

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