

# Tony McMichael

2007 Nobel peace prize recipient

**Tony McMichael (b 1942; q 1967), died from complications of pneumonia and influenza at Canberra Hospital on 26 September 2014.**

A public health visionary whose pioneering work on climate change was recognised with the Nobel peace prize, Tony McMichael combined academic rigour with political skill to cement his place as one of modern epidemiology's great minds.

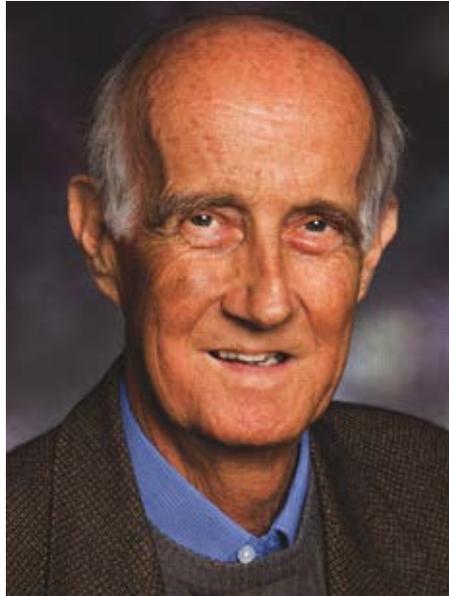
McMichael, the son of an architect and a homemaker, graduated from the University of Adelaide's medical school in 1967, at a time of intense global concern about population growth. A summer in Delhi's leper colonies and a trip to build a hospital in Papua New Guinea's Tari highlands had been formative experiences for the sheltered young medical student, opening his eyes to the injustices and health impacts of poverty. "I was impressed by his generous nature, his quiet leadership and his intellectual curiosity," his wife, Judith Healy, said of the man she first met in Tari.

Instead of following classmates into clinical practice—although he spent a brief period as a general practitioner—McMichael was drawn into politics as president of Australia's National Union of Students (NUS). During this time he forged lifelong connections that would help him translate research into public health policy.

It was at the NUS that McMichael met Basil Hetzel, who convinced him to join Monash University's newly created department of social and preventive medicine as its first doctoral student in epidemiology.

McMichael's earliest recognition came with the publication of his paper on the "healthy worker effect"<sup>1</sup>—the idea that people who were employed were more likely to be healthy than the broader population. Cited some 450 times, the paper has engendered an entire body of spinoff research.

Inspired by the work of Rene Dubos and Paul Ehrlich, McMichael penned a series of student essays titled "Spaceship Earth," about the fragile balance between humans and the planet. Over time these ideas crystallised into a book, *Planetary Overload*,<sup>2</sup> which was published in 1993. It revolved around five major themes: climate change, ozone depletion, land degradation, biodiversity loss, and the explosion of cities. Bold for its time, the manuscript was rejected by Oxford University Press. The epidemiologist Andy



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Haines was instrumental in its publication by Cambridge University Press. He described it as a "visionary book that was way ahead of its time." "The scientific community is only now beginning to understand the import of what Tony wrote more than 20 years ago," said Haines, now professor of public health and primary care at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. The volume established McMichael as one of the world's leading thinkers on climate change and health. "I saw it coming over the horizon, and I thought this is, firstly, very interesting, I must find out about it," McMichael said of his prophetic interest in climate change.<sup>3</sup> "But secondly this looks to me as if it's going to have very important consequences for human health."

Between 1993 and 2001 he headed the health risks assessment for the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)<sup>4</sup> and Millennium Ecosystem Assessment,<sup>5</sup> work for which he and some two thousand other IPCC scientists were jointly awarded the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize with Al Gore.

McMichael's research extended far beyond global warming. It spanned infectious and autoimmune disease, nutrition, passive smoking, uranium mining, and water fluoridation. His studies of children living near a smelter in South Australia<sup>6</sup> were pivotal in the removal of lead from petrol in more than 100 countries. World first bans on tobacco advertising and public smoking were enacted in Australia as a result of his advocacy.

An emeritus professor at the Australian National University, McMichael also held honorary positions at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, and the University of Copenhagen. An accomplished pianist and avid lover of Chopin, he was a member of the UK Academy of Medical Sciences, the US National Academy of Sciences, and was an officer of the Order of Australia.

McMichael's work was as prolific as it was seminal. He published more than 300 peer reviewed papers and 160 book chapters, as well as a second book, *Human Frontiers, Environments and Disease*.<sup>7</sup> A third book was well advanced when he died, less than a week after major climate change protests swept the globe. He had been living for the past decade with a kidney donated by his wife.

One of McMichael's final public acts was an open letter in the *Medical Journal of Australia*, asking Prime Minister Tony Abbott to include climate change on the 2014 G20 agenda in Brisbane.<sup>8</sup> "He saw the current lack of action on climate change as political dereliction," said *MJA* editor Stephen Leeder. He described McMichael as an academic "attuned to political advocacy, which he used with nuance and skill."

Roberto Bertollini, chief scientist and WHO representative to the EU, said McMichael had been a prominent force in making climate change a political issue in Europe: "Environmental health was enriched and changed by his work, from a reactive to a proactive discipline," he said. "It was a change in paradigm whose consequences, I think, are not fully appreciated yet."

McMichael is survived by his wife; and two daughters.

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References are on thebmj.com.

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