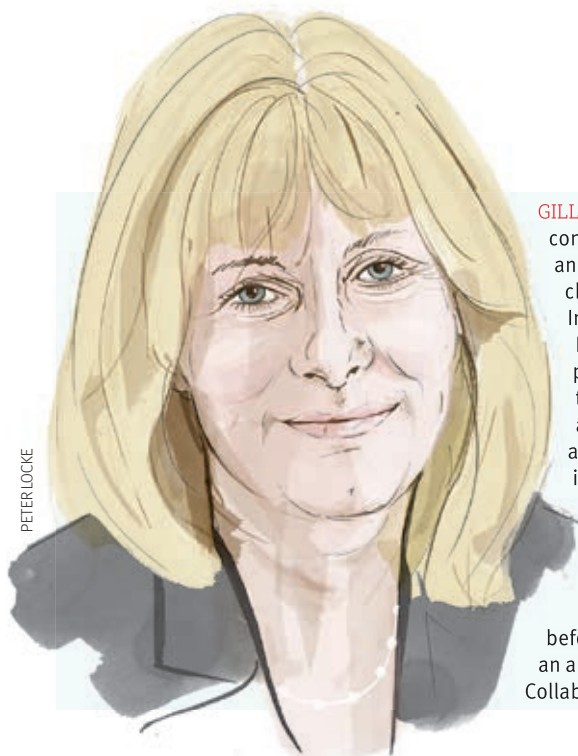


# Gillian Leng

## Pet hate is fixed opinions



PETER LOCKE

**GILLIAN LENG** sails through controversy with a gentle answer and an honest approach. As deputy chief executive of the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) she's had plenty of practice, often being the midwife to new ideas such as the NHS Evidence web portal and NICE's annexation of guidance in social care. She trained as a doctor at Leeds, spent several years at Edinburgh studying peripheral vascular disease, and worked as a consultant in public health in Bedfordshire before joining NICE. She has been an active contributor to the Cochrane Collaboration since its inception.

**What was the worst mistake in your career?**  
 "Probably recruiting staff to the wrong roles when under pressure to start up a new work programme. 'Recruit in haste, repent at leisure'"

**What was your earliest ambition?**  
 I wanted to be a vet when I was about 10 and a scientist when I was 17; eventually I chose medicine at 21.

**Who has been your biggest inspiration?**  
 Vera Brittain: I read her autobiographies when I was a student, and I hugely admired her determination to make a difference after the first world war. I've since met her daughter, Shirley Williams, who she'd written about as a child, and it all felt rather surreal.

**What was the worst mistake in your career?**  
 Probably recruiting staff to the wrong roles when under pressure to start up a new work programme. "Recruit in haste, repent at leisure."

**What was your best career move?**  
 Going to work at NICE in 2001, initially to set up the new clinical guidelines programme. I was then lucky enough to establish several other NICE work programmes, including quality standards, NHS Evidence, and guideline development for social care, all of which have been fabulously interesting and rewarding.

**Bevan or Lansley? Who has been the best and the worst health secretary in your lifetime?**  
 Bevan was best, for his vision and determination to set up the NHS. It's interesting to recall that the main opponents of the NHS in 1948 were doctors: the initial opposition was nearly 10:1.

**Who is the person you would most like to thank and why?**  
 My father, for his strong work ethic, practicality, and honesty.

**To whom would you most like to apologise?**  
 My family, for putting up with my long working hours.

**Where are or were you happiest?**  
 In the mountains of Scotland—the views and the vast open spaces are truly exhilarating.

**What single unheralded change has made the most difference in your field in your lifetime?**  
 The tremendous increase in computing power that has affected all aspects of life. In the evidence and research field, this particularly applies to the ability to generate and analyse data and to provide access to evidence in all sorts of ways, with a range of different devices.

**Do you support doctor assisted suicide?**  
 I support assisted suicide, with appropriate safeguards. Medical progress has made such great strides in preserving life—indeed, prolonging dying in some cases—that we have somewhat overlooked the need for a good end of life. We all have a responsibility to engage in the end of life debate.

**What book should every doctor read?**  
 Let's have an eclectic mix of literature to help doctors understand and steer their patients: science, history, sociology, even popular fiction.

**What poem, song, or passage of prose would you like mourners at your funeral to hear?**  
 I haven't given it much thought, but perhaps a poem by Mary Elizabeth Frye. It starts: "Do not stand at my grave and weep / I am not there. I do not sleep / I am a thousand winds that blow / I am the diamond glints on snow."

**What is your guiltiest pleasure?**  
 I have lots of little pleasures—chocolates, *The Archers*, having a foot massage—but there's no guilt attached!

**If you could be invisible for a day what would you do?**  
 Nothing that would make me feel like a voyeur. Perhaps attending a West End show—I could watch from wherever I fancied and, of course, I wouldn't have to pay.

**Clarkson or Clark? Would you rather watch *Top Gear* or *Civilisation*? What television programmes do you like?**  
 My very ad hoc viewing includes drama, current affairs, and *The Great British Bake-Off*. But definitely Clark rather than Clarkson!

**What is your most treasured possession?**  
 As a complete hoarder, I have far too many possessions. Old photos would be top of the list, plus a set of fragile magazines that used to belong to my grandfather: *Fragments from France*—humour, believe it or not, about life in the trenches.

**What, if anything, are you doing to reduce your carbon footprint?**  
 Recycling, recycling, and recycling. And growing lots of fruit and veg in the garden.

**What personal ambition do you still have?**  
 To paint something decent. So far there are only a few rather nondescript watercolours.

**Summarise your personality in three words**  
 Optimistic, calm, logical.

**What is your pet hate?**  
 People with fixed opinions who don't want to listen or debate. Very little in life is black and white.

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