

Celia Ingham Clark

Enthusiastic and determined



CELIA INGHAM CLARK is the NHS England director for reducing premature mortality. She qualified at Cambridge and the Middlesex universities, then trained as a general surgeon and was a consultant and medical director at the Whittington Hospital in north London. Her interest in health policy began as a member of the BMA's Junior Doctors Committee in the 1980s, and her focus is on improving the quality of patient care. In 2013 she was awarded an MBE for services to the NHS.

What book should every doctor read?

"Better: A Surgeon's Notes on Performance by Atul Gawande. It gives examples of simple, low tech changes that, if systematically implemented, can greatly improve patient care. The best example is perhaps the systematic application of proper handwashing"

What was your earliest ambition?

To be an astronaut, until I realised that I had been born at least 50 years too early for this to be realistic.

Who has been your biggest inspiration?

My father, Ken Parsons, who was a rural GP who showed me the difference good doctors can make to their patients' lives; and Richard Wood, who supervised my surgical research and taught me to keep asking questions and how to speak to an audience with confidence. Sadly, neither of them is still with us.

What was the worst mistake in your career?

Applying for something that I thought was a general surgical registrar post but turned out to be based in another specialty. I had to back out at interview.

What was your best career move?

Taking up the post of medical director at the Whittington Hospital. I really enjoyed being a colorectal surgeon, but in that role I could help only one patient at a time. In medical management, if you get it right, you can improve the quality of care for many more patients.

Bevan or Lansley? Who has been the best and the worst health secretary in your lifetime?

From what I have seen it's a very difficult job: there will always be a demand for more resources than are available because of new technologies and drugs, demographic changes, and increasing public expectation. A good health secretary has to ensure a balanced approach, taking into account public and professional views and the changing trends in society.

Who is the person you would most like to thank and why?

John Marks, director of studies for medicine at Girton College, who was my tutor at Cambridge. Among many other things, he taught me to use lists to get organised, and this advice is increasingly valuable in a world of instant messaging.

To whom would you most like to apologise?

To the patients and their families for whom my surgery failed to produce the outcome we wanted.

If you were given £1m what would you spend it on?

I'd give it to one of the big health charities and let it decide. They have sound processes for selecting where the money can have the greatest effect.

Where are or were you happiest?

Walking in Pembrokeshire with my husband, sons, and dog on a fine, sunny day. Actually, it's quite fun even when it rains.

What single unheralded change has made the most difference in your field in your lifetime?

In medical management, the recognition that management skills, like clinical and teaching skills, can be learnt and then used by many more doctors to improve the quality of care for patients.

Do you support doctor assisted suicide?

I can see a theoretical argument for it in extreme cases, but I don't think that I'd ever be able to put it into practice.

What book should every doctor read?

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What poem, song, or passage of prose would you like mourners at your funeral to hear?

It would have to reflect my Welsh roots; both of my parents were Welsh, and I represented Wales at lacrosse a long time ago. Probably the hymn "Guide Me, O Thou Great Redeemer."

What is your guiltiest pleasure?

Probably cheese.

What is your most treasured possession?

My cat (if you can call it a possession, which is doubtful).

What, if anything, are you doing to reduce your carbon footprint?

Whenever possible I try to walk between meetings in London. I use a pedometer and usually manage over 10 000 steps a day.

What personal ambition do you still have?

Professionally, I want to be part of a team that reduces premature mortality in England. Personally, I would like to become a grandmother (but not just yet, thank you, boys).

Summarise your personality in three words

Enthusiastic, determined, organised (at least at work).

What is your pet hate?

One of my old teachers said that if you didn't know something he didn't mind if it was from ignorance, but he did if it was from laziness. I think that professionals in medicine have a responsibility to keep learning and to keep asking questions throughout their professional lives.

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