

# Irvine Loudon

General practitioner, academic medical historian, and artist

**Irvine Loudon (b 1924; q Oxford 1951; DRCOG, DM (Oxon), FRCGP), d 7 January 2015.**

Irvine Loudon was a medical academic historian, a dedicated doctor who reformed many aspects of clinical practice, and an active artist throughout his life. The polymath's achievements earned him a place in the National Portrait Gallery among the leading medical figures of the 20th century.

After his career as a general practitioner, Loudon became a full time medical historian, based at the Wellcome Unit for the History of Medicine at Oxford University. His books on topics including maternal mortality and childbed fever received worldwide acclaim.<sup>1,2</sup> He also wrote about the evolution of general practice, and edited Oxford University Press's *Western Medicine: an Illustrated History*.<sup>3</sup>

Iain Chalmers, editor of the James Lind Library, says Loudon had a profound influence on him and left a substantial legacy.<sup>4,6</sup> "He was a kind and very encouraging mentor. I owe him an enormous amount." When reviewing Loudon's 1992 book, *Death in Childbirth*, for the *Lancet*, Chalmers wrote that it "deserves to be regarded as a milestone in the history of concern about death during childbirth." The book showed, with "meticulous" handling of evidence, the extent to which quality of care by birth attendants could make the difference between life and death for mothers. It concluded that "sound obstetric practice by well trained midwives could produce low levels of maternal mortality, even in populations that were socially and economically deprived." The work influenced policy makers and bodies such as the World Health Organization.

Chalmers told *The BMJ* how Loudon's methods stood out. "Very few people who have become full time medical historians have a medical degree. As a consequence, they too often tend to shy away from anything that involves quantification." Chalmers said that another book, *The Tragedy of Childbed Fever* (which Loudon considered his best),<sup>2</sup> was so important that two US political scientists went to visit Loudon in his home outside Oxford to discuss it with him.

Other works also made a stir—including a paper in *Medical History*, entitled "On Talks," which complained about graduate students and others reading too fast from scripts and confusing audiences with overly detailed tables and graphs.



As an author Loudon had rich experience to draw on from his earlier career as a GP in Wantage from 1952 to 1981. He developed specialist skills in obstetrics and personally delivered many hundreds of babies, most of them in the local hospital's maternity unit. He once wrote that obstetrics was a "very satisfying and optimistic part of general practice. Things can occasionally go wrong, and when they do you've got to move like lightning, particularly with postpartum haemorrhage, but mostly it's sheer joy."

The GP's common sense, skill, compassion, and "good sense of humour" were summed up by a mother paying tribute in a local newsletter. She went to him in a worried state after her in-laws judged her baby underfed and sent her infant milk formula in the post. Loudon trashed their "diagnosis," saying, "Go home, throw the Ostermilk over the hedge into the field, and remember not to be so interfering when you become a mother-in-law."

Mark Drury, a colleague recruited by Loudon to the Wantage practice, says patients and staff warmed to the friendly doctor who always had a "sort of Gothic twinkle in his eyes." "Coffee times at surgery break were great fun; he was full of anecdotes." And innovative, too says Drury. Loudon and colleagues became fed up grappling with the patients' notes that kept bursting out of the traditional A5 envelopes. They designed a bigger and better A4 folder, with compartments, and got the Ministry of Health to fund its production—effectively kickstarting the development of modern GP medical records.

Loudon was said to have chosen general practice rather than hospital medicine because he wanted to "serve the community and also be his own master." He held a strong sense of social commitment and cared passionately about the NHS and the role of local general practitioner hospitals, at a time when many were threatened with closure.<sup>7-9</sup>

## No private work

Roger Jones, emeritus professor of general practice at King's College, London, drew on Loudon's support when he was secretary of the association of general practitioner hospitals. Jones says: "Irvine had written a history of GP hospitals and was just a very valuable source of encouragement and information about the way that they developed and the way they were organised. I learned a lot... it fed into our campaign material."

Loudon refused to take private patients. He also powered the development of one of the country's first purpose built health centres, next to the Wantage Hospital. Here he brought allied services, such as the district nurses, under one roof.

Loudon grew up in Cardiff—he was the younger son of a Scottish general practitioner, who moved from Manchester to south Wales—and came to love the hills and valleys. At Oxford University Loudon's initial studies were interrupted by the second world war. He joined the Royal Air Force in 1943 and trained as a pilot, serving in coastal command in northeast Scotland. A place in medical school at Oxford awaited him after the war, and it was here that he met his future wife, Jean, to whom he was married for 66 years.

He was devoted to his family and teased them with practical jokes. Posing as Ian from Wantage, Loudon once called into a live Radio 2 broadcast, in which his daughter Mary was appearing as a guest, to wrongfoot her with weird questions delivered in a "pedantic drawl." Jean said later she had tried to stop him but he had "locked himself in the bathroom with the phone" and appeared "very pleased" with his efforts.

Loudon's creative side also shone in drawing and graphic art. He trained as an etcher at the Oxford Printmakers' Cooperative, and was elected a fellow of the Royal Society of Painter-Printmakers. He was pleased that his works sold well, but he also gave etchings to friends and the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford.

Loudon's eldest daughter, Catherine, died in 2001. He leaves Jean, and four children.

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References are in the version on thebmj.com.

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**John Richard Carr Gardham**



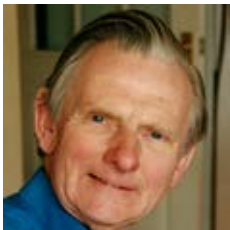
**Consultant general and vascular surgeon at Chase Farm Hospital, Enfield (b 1937; q Cambridge/London 1961; FRCS, MChir, MD Cambridge), died from acute lymphoblastic leukaemia on 6 August 2014.**

John Richard Carr Gardham trained as a general surgeon at a time when general surgery included a multitude of specialties, including urology, and when he was appointed to his consultant post at Chase Farm Hospital in 1975, his practice covered an enormous range. He enjoyed committee work, where his stubborn streak often worked to great advantage. However, with changes in specialisation and funding in the 1990s, the traditional district general hospital became vulnerable, and Richard retired immediately before a merger took place. Richard retired to Exmoor and became secretary of the Devon and Somerset Stag Hounds. He leaves his wife, Mary; three children; and three grandchildren.

J P Bolton

[Cite this as: BMJ 2015;350:h740](#)

**Robin John Hope**



**Former consultant anaesthetist London Chest Hospital and Royal London Hospital (b 1936; q 1962 Christ's College, Cambridge/Middlesex Hospital; FFARCS), died from complications of Parkinson's disease on 1 November 2014.**

Robin John Hope did house jobs at the Middlesex and Chase Farm hospitals, followed by six months as ship's surgeon on Blue Star Line,

travelling to South America. He then worked as a general practitioner in Lagos, Nigeria, for 18 months. On returning to the UK he became a GP in Golders Green. Subsequently he trained in anaesthetics at St Thomas' and the Middlesex hospitals and was appointed to a consultant post at the London Chest Hospital and the Royal London in 1975. He had an extensive private practice at the Harley Street Clinic and the Princess Grace Hospital. He retired early in 1994 because of the onset of Parkinson's disease. He leaves his wife, Judy; three children; and five grandchildren.

KJ Wark, J Wright, A Marshall

[Cite this as: BMJ 2015;350:h552](#)

**Andrew James Johnson**



**General and respiratory physician Kent and Canterbury Hospital (b 1945; q Cardiff 1969; FRCP), died from a cerebral glioma on 14 January 2015.**

Andrew James Johnson ("Andy") undertook specialist training at the Brompton Hospital and in Edinburgh. Appointed to the Kent and Canterbury Hospital in 1983, he introduced new techniques and expanded the department. An outstanding teacher, he was sometime clinical tutor, director of medical education, undergraduate subdean, and associate educational fellow of King's College, London, and he was responsible for supervising the education of numerous students undergoing their medical training in the south east. He organised the MRCP examination in Canterbury. He leaves his wife, Jean; four children; and two grandchildren.

Stuart Field

[Cite this as: BMJ 2015;350:h739](#)

**Nora Mason**

**Former general practitioner Grange-over-Sands (b 1921; q University of Manchester 1945; MD Yale), d 6 Jan 2015.**



Nora Mason entered medical school in 1938, where she met her future husband, Robert Mason. She was awarded a Rockefeller scholarship in 1943 to complete her medical studies in the USA. She graduated at Yale in 1944 and worked for a year in Richmond, Virginia. When she returned in 1945, she had to requalify at Manchester. After early posts in paediatrics she met up with Robert, by then a major in the Royal Army Medical Corps, returning from the Far East. They married in 1946 and moved to Grange-over-Sands, where they established themselves in general practice in 1947. In later years Nora specialised in family planning. Predeceased by her husband in 1996, she leaves two children, four grandchildren, and four great grandchildren.

Robert Mason

[Cite this as: BMJ 2015;350:h741](#)

**Abraham Osborne**



**General practitioner south London (b 1923; q Edinburgh 1945), d 11 September 2014.**

Abraham Osborne ("Berl") was present at the advent of the NHS, returning from national service to join a busy general practice in Balham in 1948. Young doctors at that time were often exploited, seeing up to 100 patients a day and working every third night, but Berl's dedication and commitment saw him through to retirement as senior partner 37 years later. He also worked all over London, as well as at the Priory Hospital in Roehampton as a certifying doctor under the Mental Health Act and at the drug rehabilitation clinic at Guy's Hospital. Outside medicine he was a fine singer and public speaker

and wrote papers on the history of the Jews of Spain. He leaves Clarice, his wife of 63 years.

Clarice Osborne, David Grant

[Cite this as: BMJ 2015;350:h398](#)

**Harold Walter Henry Shepperd**



**Former consultant otolaryngologist Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast (b 1924; q Queen's University Belfast 1947; DLO, FRCS Eng), d 20 November 2013.**

Harold Walter Henry Shepperd was appointed consultant otolaryngologist to the Royal Victoria Hospital and Lagan Valley Hospital, Lisburn, in 1966 and gave excellent service to these hospitals until he retired in 1989. His special interest was in head and neck surgery, and his special characteristic was his care for his patients and colleagues. He served in the section of laryngology in the Royal Society of Medicine, the Irish Otolaryngological Society, and the Royal College of Surgeons of England. Outside medicine he was an active member of the Royal Naval Reserve, achieving the rank of surgeon commander and senior reserve officer on *HMS Caroline*. He leaves his wife, June; five stepchildren; and three children by a former marriage.

Alan G Kerr

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