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OBITUARIES

Jane Wardle

Prolific health psychologist and director of Cancer Research UK Health Behaviour Research Centre

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Jane Wardle was a clinical psychologist whose research had a profound impact on cancer prevention. In 1991 she was persuaded by a colleague to join the nascent health behaviour unit at King's College London's Institute of Psychiatry. The unit was funded by the Imperial Cancer Research Fund (ICRF) and had a brief to look at cancer prevention.

Before joining the unit Wardle had been a practising clinical psychologist and lecturer at the institute, but she had also undertaken research on obesity, binge eating, and dietary preferences. She studied the eating behaviour of infant twins, observing them in the clinic and asking their parents to record their eating behaviour at home. Eventually she and her coauthors were able to show the influence of the FTO gene, and that those children who carried the obese type variant were less likely to stop eating when they were full.[1]

The study of obesity in both adults and children was an interest throughout Wardle's life, and she came up with the "Ten Top Tips" campaign—a list of helpful and easy to understand messages aimed at promoting a healthy attitude to food and eating over the course of a lifetime.[2] She also set up the charity Weight Concern, whose aims are to promote healthy eating and weight in both adults and children.

When Wardle became director of the health behaviour unit in 1996 it moved to University College London and, under her tutelage, flourished. Now, as Cancer UK Health Behaviour Research Centre, it has become one of the most important research centres of its type in the world. The unit has more than 70 staff members, and Wardle personally supervised more than 40 PhD students during her career.

In the early days of her stewardship, however, not all those at ICRF (which would later become Cancer Research UK) were convinced of the value of the unit, with some in the charity's hierarchy dismissing its work as not "proper" science.

In the early 2000s, budget constraints meant that all the charity's research centres were under review. Two of ICRF's most eminent scientists—future Nobel prize winning molecular biologists for whom behavioural psychology was probably pretty airy fairy stuff—were members of a panel that visited the unit to assess whether its grant should continue. A colleague remembers the scientists being "dazzled" by Wardle and the unit's rigour and evidence based research.

In fact, airy fairy was the last thing that Wardle's research could be described as. With Wendy Atkins she worked on the UK flexible sigmoidoscopy trial, a randomised controlled trial of 170 000 people that showed that a single screening test could reduce incidence of bowel cancer by 23% and mortality by 31%.[3] Wardle's work was focused on how to encourage people to take up screening.

She had an important role in the introduction of the human papillomavirus vaccination to prevent cervical cancer, conducting a trial that showed that 75% of mothers surveyed would accept the vaccination for their daughters despite media hysteria over the vaccine's potential to increase promiscuity.[4]

Despite her eminent career, Wardle had a tough childhood. Her father, Peter Wardle, was a portrait painter who was both impecunious and often absent from the family. Her mother was unwell, and it often fell to Wardle to look after her two younger brothers, sometimes for several weeks at a time. The three of them even spent a Christmas at a children's home. When Wardle was 15, her father married Ruth, who was only in her early 20s but who provided much needed stability. Wardle attended 13 different schools but showed early determination by asking Mary Warnock (later to become Baroness Warnock and mistress of Girton College, Cambridge) if she could attend Oxford High,

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where Warnock was headmistress. Warnock gave Wardle a place at the school, where she did well, winning a place at Oxford University to study psychology and physiology. Wardle then went to the Institute of Psychiatry, where she did a masters and then a PhD.

She met her first husband, Nick Stirling, while at Oxford, and the couple had a daughter, Lucy. In 1982 she met and later married Andrew Steptoe, now British Heart Foundation professor of psychology and director of the Institute of Epidemiology and Health Care at University College, London. The couple had a son, Matt.

There were few boundaries between the couple's private and professional lives, and they collaborated on papers and book chapters and would attend conferences together. Wardle loved her work and was astonishingly productive as author and coauthor of more than 700 papers, 100 of which were written in the last two years.

She was a supportive mentor and teacher, inspiring great loyalty among her students and colleagues. But she was also fun—she loved to gossip and was witty and irreverent. Work was her passion, but her family were her priority, and she would drop anything for her children.

In 1996, just three months after being appointed director of the health behaviour unit, Wardle was diagnosed with chronic lymphocytic leukaemia. She wrote in the *Observer*[5] about her shock at receiving the diagnosis and how she and those around her adjusted and reacted to the news. She hid the diagnosis from her children for a year, thinking she was protecting them from the shock: "But when I finally told them, the greatest shock was that such a momentous event could have taken place behind their backs."

She leaves her husband, and two children.

Frances Jane Wardle, professor of clinical psychology (b 1950; graduated University of Oxford 1973), died from complications due to chronic lymphocytic leukaemia on 20 October 2015.

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