



# OBSERVATIONS

## BMJ CONFIDENTIAL

### Richard Lilford: Hates non sequiturs at dinner parties



#### What was your earliest ambition?

To be a doctor, from age 10. I liked the idea of being able to make a diagnosis and then cure someone.

#### Who has been your biggest inspiration?

My mother, who told me that it's better to be bullied than to be ignored.

#### What was the worst mistake in your career?

Joining the civil service. It's a great institution, but I wasn't cut out to be "part of the machine."

#### What was your best career move?

Becoming a doctor. I miss not seeing patients in my current role, but improving patient care is the motivation behind all of my work.

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

I got to know William Waldegrave at the time of Margaret Thatcher's reforms, which I supported, and he was thoughtful, sincere, and intelligent. Lansley over-reached himself: the patient wouldn't take the medicine!

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

Mr Forbes, my prep school biology teacher, who encouraged me when my classmates ridiculed my aspiration to study medicine on the grounds that I was too stupid.

#### To whom would you most like to apologise?

To my late father: he loved to eat fat, and I nagged him remorselessly as he tucked in. Now I learn that it wasn't doing him any harm.

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

Homes for my children and school fees for my grandchildren.

#### Where are or were you happiest?

Losing myself in play, first with my children and now with my grandchildren.

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

Randomised trials were hardly ever conducted when I was a medical student, but they've become the main source of clinical evidence during my lifetime. However, I'm still waiting for people to adopt the Bayesian way of interpreting results.

#### Do you support doctor assisted suicide?

Passionately—it's what I want for myself when my time comes.

**Biography**

Richard Lilford is professor of public health at Warwick University and director of the Collaboration for Leadership in Applied Health Research and Care (CLAHRC) in the West Midlands. His career has been remarkably varied, with chairs at three different universities in obstetrics and gynaecology, clinical epidemiology, and now public health, as well as a spell as regional director and clinical trials adviser for the Department of Health. His broad knowledge makes his regular blogs on behalf of CLAHRC West Midlands a treat for those lucky or clever enough to get on the mailing list.

**What book should every doctor read?**

*Clinical Decision Analysis* by Milton Weinstein and Harvey Fineberg. The intellectual framework whereby probabilities and preferences can be reconciled was a revelation to me. Then take some time off and read *Cancer Ward* by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn.

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

*Lily of the Lamplight (Lili Marleen)*. Marlene Dietrich's voice carried over the desert air from the Afrika Corps to the eighth army, where my father was serving. The English version became a hit in the West and was the theme song for my parents' love affair.

**What is your guiltiest pleasure?**

Drinking with my friends until late.

**What television programmes do you like?**

Excellent documentaries, such as Brian Cox's on physics. But mostly we watch films such as *Doubt*, starring Meryl Streep and Philip Seymour Hoffman, and drama series such as *The Night Manager*, starring Tom Hiddleston and Hugh Laurie.

**What is your most treasured possession?**

My house, where I live with my wife and where our three children grew up.

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

Oh dear.

**What personal ambition do you still have?**

To bring Bayesian philosophy into the mainstream in medical and health service delivery evaluation. It's about time.

**Summarise your personality in three words**

Logical, sentimental, resilient.

**Where does alcohol fit into your life?**

I just don't understand how people can enjoy a meal without wine.

**What is your pet hate?**

Non sequiturs at dinner parties.

**What would be on the menu for your last supper?**

Ah . . . oysters, grouse, soufflé; Chablis, Château Palmer, Bollinger.

**Do you have any regrets about becoming a doctor/academic?**

To be a doctor is a wonderful thing. It's not just another job—it's a way of living.

**If you weren't in your present position what would you be doing instead?**

Tropical medicine.