Paul Wilkinson: environmental epidemiologist at the forefront of research into the health benefits of climate change action

Penny Warren

If excess winter deaths are linked to colder temperatures, why do so many more die in England than in colder places such as Scandinavia? In 2001, epidemiologist Paul Wilkinson gave the answer: his groundbreaking paper “Cold Comfort” showed it’s the temperature inside the home that is crucial. Draughty, cold housing is inimical to health. Wilkinson repeatedly found that what is good for the planet (reducing carbon emissions, cycling and walking, energy efficient housing) is also good for human health. In 1989 he became a research fellow and honorary registrar at the National Heart and Lung Institute. He had decided to make researching the health benefits of climate change mitigation strategies his life’s work and in 1993 joined the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine as a lecturer. He worked there for nearly 30 years, becoming professor of environmental epidemiology and head of the environmental epidemiological unit from 2003 to 2007.

Wilkinson, who became director of the National Institute for Health and Care Research health protection research unit in environmental change and health, repeatedly urged his colleagues to “think big.” There was no time to waste, and he was hugely energetic. During his career, he led or was the co-investigator on over 70 research projects, covering subjects ranging from energy efficient buildings and air and noise pollution to the impact of flooding on health, and speed restrictions on road injuries.

The relation between climate, the built environment, and health is multifaceted and often difficult to pin down, but Wilkinson’s colleague Andy Haines said, “Paul contributed to epidemiological methods that would allow us to be more rigorous in quantifying environmental effects on human health and he had the ability to link the epidemiological detail with the bigger picture. He could think broadly and expansively while also homing in on detail.”

Global expert on health and climate change

As a member of the UK Committee on the Medical Effects of Air Pollutants, Wilkinson was able to influence government policy on air pollution and his
work on temperature and ventilation informed building regulations. On the global stage, he advised the World Health Organization and he was the scientific director of the ambitious Complex Urban Systems for Sustainability and Health programme funded by the Wellcome Trust. In this role, he travelled to the six cities in the study, offering scientific evidence on health and environmental matters. In Kisumu in Kenya, for example, he advised on a project to manage the vast rubbish dumps and blocked drains blighting the environment and the inhabitants’ health.

A gifted speaker, Wilkinson was much appreciated for his authoritative mastery of the facts and clear delivery—as a lecturer, on government committees, and when giving evidence in environmental health cases, including that of 9 year old Ella Adoo Kissi-Debrah, who died with air pollution exposure as one of the causes. He also enjoyed teaching epidemiology to international students at summer schools held in Prague and Krakow, where he was popular and frequently invited by the students to join in with the closing celebrations.

**Early life**

Paul Daryll Wilkinson was born in Yeovil, Somerset. His father, George, had been evacuated to Somerset from London in the second world war, and he stayed on when it ended, becoming an electrician and marrying Helen Jones (known to everyone as Rita). The couple had two sons, Graeme and Paul.

Wilkinson went to the local grammar school but then won a scholarship to board at King’s College Taunton. In 1978 he went up to the University of Oxford to study physics. He swapped to medicine after a term but remained interested in physics, and it informed his later work: he wrote models to show how air circulates in buildings, for example. Many academics as they become more eminent do less modelling and data analysis, but Wilkinson kept up with new statistical methods throughout his career.

After qualifying Wilkinson found the research element the most satisfying part of his junior clinical jobs at the Royal Marsden and St George’s Chest Hospital in London, which led him to embark on his career in epidemiology. His clinical background was important to him, as it gave him knowledge of the way body systems are affected by environmental factors. He could also never be just an academic number cruncher; he was always aware that behind the statistics are real people struggling with health problems.

While at Oxford, Wilkinson met Kay MacLarnon, a fellow medical student. They married in 1986 and had a son, Guy, in 2005. Their family home was in Northampton, and Wilkinson, like his father, got satisfaction from doing practical DIY jobs around the house. Before Covid-19, he lived in London during much of the week and regularly cycled to the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. Although work took up much of his time, he savoured time with his family, including driving his son to tennis lessons.

On 11 September 2022 Wilkinson died suddenly from a pulmonary thromboembolism. He leaves his wife, Kay; his son; and his brother.