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Celebrating Public Health Lives

Jerry Morris memorial conference

Jerry Morris, as readers of this journal will know, had a profound influence on post war public health. His work on exercise is well known and his research with the social statistician Richard Titmuss, helped develop social medicine ideas and bring research to bear on them. From the 1962 Royal College of Physicians first report on smoking to the 1970 Black Report on inequalities in health, Jerry was a member of key post war public health committees. His concept of the community physician lay behind the reorientation of public health and its relocation from local government to NHS in the 1970s. He was a key player in the foundation of the Faculty of Community Medicine and was an adviser to Labour governments in the 1960s and 70s.

Jerry Morris would have been 100 in May 2010: in 2009, some colleagues started to plan a small afternoon symposium in his honour. Jerry was a forward looking person and the plan was to have short papers which looked to the future of areas such as exercise and chronic disease epidemiology, on which his influence had been profound. Because of his advanced age, the meeting was to be short and attendance limited.

Events turned out differently. Jerry did not reach his centenary and died in October 2009. Our conference turned into a bigger event, a full day, with registration from nearly 200 people. Many in the audience had been Jerry's students and co-workers and we were pleased to welcome Jo Ann Paffenbarger, the widow of Ralph Paffenbarger, who had worked on exercise research with Jerry, who had flown over specially from the US for the conference.

We kept the initial plan, which was to look back on Jerry's career but also forward, and all the speakers were asked to bear this in mind. Professor Sir Andy Haines, Director of the London School, opened with a review of Jerry's career, but also a personal memory, recalling how Jerry had gripped him by the arm and had urged him to criticise the government. Many speakers also remembered that grip. Sir Liam Donaldson, Chief Medical Officer, recalled his first meeting with Jerry when, as a young lecturer at Leicester, he was sent to meet and drive him from the station for a lecture. Jerry, however, insisted initially that they walk the one and a half miles to the medical school, only later relenting. During the course of the journey, he grilled Donaldson on who were the twenty most important public health people in Leicester. Years later, after a 90th birthday conference at the School, he was still being grilled, this time about government policy. Jerry's work on bus drivers and conductors was the research which everyone

remembered but Donaldson also drew attention to his impact through *Tomorrow's Community Physician* on public health practice; his concern for the empowerment of the citizen and the patient; his influence on a national health strategy, where the work of the Black committee helped inform the Labour government's recent work on health and inequality. Finally he drew attention to his consistency of purpose – he persisted in his research and aims, believing that eventually a breakthrough and change would be achieved.

Professor Alan Maryon Davies, President of the Faculty of Public Health, spoke of Jerry's role in the foundation of that institution. The idea originated in a dinner held at the London School in 1968. Non medics had been excluded at an early stage and Archie Cochrane provided the main link with their location in the Society of Social Medicine. The Faculty was launched in March 1972 with Cochrane as its first president. Jerry had drawn up the initial blueprint and some felt he should have been president. Maryon Davies drew attention to the changed nature of the Faculty, not only a change of name, to Public Health, but now a strong multidisciplinary and overseas membership. A Royal College of Public Health was on the cards.

These opening speakers were followed by two with more personal memories. Professor Michael Davies from Israel recalled fifty years of friendship with the Morris family. His father had been a friend of Dr Nathan Morris, Jerry's father, who was an authority on religious education. He recalled tea time meetings when Jerry's Social Medicine Unit was based at the London Hospital. Dr Morris, as he then was, '*ruled with a light but firm, hand*'. Two weeks before Jerry's death, Davies said that they had discussed Jerry's research on a minimum income for healthy living for older people, a conversation which was never to be resumed. David Morris, Jerry's son, recalled his father's insomnia, and his enormous love of reading – a huge range of journals and magazines covered each week (his colleagues could attest to this: relevant cuttings were often passed on). His wife Galia died in 1997 and from the age of 90, Jerry and his two children visited a wide range of overseas destinations together. He recalled Jerry's perfectionism in writing; '*finding the right word*' was crucial.

The afternoon session of the conference was opened by Professor Sir Michael Marmot, who, as a young lecturer, had been a colleague of Jerry's at the School. He recalled the history of inequalities under the Labour government and how Morris' work had informed his own reports, in particular the recent global report on the social determinants of health.

When Sir Donald Acheson had produced his report on inequalities, an editorial in the *British Medical Journal* from Morris and Davey Smith, dissected that report. Marmot took issue with those who argued that the Labour government had not improved health inequality: the worse off men had improved their life expectancy by 2.9 years over just ten years and women by 1.9 years. He drew attention to the local activities and partnerships which had helped – from the Mayor of London's strategy to the North West Regional strategy, a localism which Black had endorsed.

Dr Melvyn Hillsdon, who had worked with Jerry in his later years at the School, recalled his first meeting with Jerry in 1991, when, at a conference on sports medicine, the lift doors opened to reveal a man (Jerry) with his swimming costume and goggles already on. Melvyn drew attention to Jerry's later work on the Allied Dunbar National Fitness Survey, a national survey which set standards for health related to age and gender. The survey had found that many in the age group 55–64 found it difficult to walk for any length of time. The enquiry into fitness levels in the Health Survey of England in 2008 was as a result of Jerry's prodding. The CMO's report in 2010 also focussed on physical activity.

Professor Elizabeth Dowler had worked with Jerry on his last piece of research on the minimum income for healthy living. She saw this as part of a long tradition of work on food and income dating back to Boyd Orr in the 1930s. Dowler pointed out that in many areas it is not possible to live healthily on the current minimum wage, and as Jerry had argued in a letter to the *Lancet* in 2002, the minimum income for health should be taken into account within government interventions aimed at raising living standards. Her talk was followed by a comment from Frank Dobson, who was Minister of Health at the time this work was being presented to Tony Blair. Frank remembered his early days as a Camden councillor and contact with Jerry and with the local Medical Officer of Health, Dr Wilfred Harding. He recalled the influence the Black Report had on him and how his copy had been stolen from his office when he was Minister. Dobson's point was that decent housing had not had enough attention as part of the inequalities debate.

The final speaker was Professor George Davey Smith who had worked extensively with Jerry and also interviewed him. Jerry's work with Richard Titmuss had been profoundly influential in the 1940s. When their work on peptic ulcer was read by Mellanby at the Medical Research Council it had led to funding for the Social Medicine Unit. His work on epidemiology in *Uses of Epidemiology* had shifted the focus from infectious to chronic disease. Jerry had focussed on a new style of partnership between the community and the individual in the prevention of ill health. Davey Smith drew

attention to the origins in the Social Medicine Unit of aspects of health research which we now take for granted – operational research and also the role of psychologists and sociologists. The original hypothesis of the bus driver study had been that stress was at the root of heart disease and only later was physical activity singled out.

The conference ended with a reception which gave a final chance for family, students and friends to meet and to reminisce. The School archive service mounted a Morris exhibition and Jerry's archive has been donated to the School. A Jerry Morris room was opened in the new School building in Tavistock Place during the conference lunch break. We will miss Jerry's presence, a familiar figure walking along the corridors of the old School building, and an example of a determined and productive old age: his influence lives on.

Ethical approval

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