

Ann McPherson

General practitioner, communicator, and campaigner for assisted dying

Typically exploiting her final misfortune of pancreatic cancer to help others, in July 2009 the general practitioner, writer, and campaigner Ann McPherson wrote an opinion piece to argue that dying patients should be allowed to choose the time and place of their death (*BMJ* 2009;339:b2827). She wanted “the possibility of now being able to see dying as something to be respected and celebrated as a finally fulfilling experience rather than a technological failure.”

Many of us understood and even envied her relief that “I no longer have to worry about the next research assessment exercise.” But amazingly she continued to work for another two years. In this time she established and chaired yet another initiative: Healthcare Professionals for Assisted Dying’s mission is that “terminally ill, mentally competent adults should have the choice of an assisted death, subject to legal safeguards” (www.hpad.org.uk). But Ann was not given this choice. She survived breast cancer 16 years ago but died from pancreatic cancer on 28 May.

Health Freak

Ann could have had a fulfilling life as a committed, effective, and much respected Oxford general practitioner, providing her patients with continuity of care in an increasingly battered NHS. But this was not enough for Ann’s ambitions and energies. While her children were growing up she began a series of books to answer children’s questions about health and illness in a way that they could understand, coauthored with Aidan Macfarlane, an Oxford paediatrician. First came *Mum—I Feel Funny* and then *The Diary of a Teenage Health Freak* (*BMJ* 2009;339:b3355). The latter topped W H Smith’s teenage book charts and was made into a television series for Channel 4. Many other books followed. Arising from these, she and Aidan hosted a teenage “virtual doctor’s surgery” for 10-15 year olds, answering their questions online about health and disease (www.teenagehealthfreak.org).

Her books led to many radio broadcasts and a certain amount of fame, which I think she enjoyed. It certainly came in useful when she needed to raise money for her next big idea: a charity to help patients understand their illnesses. With an old friend, Andrew Herxheimer,

a clinical pharmacologist, she created the DIPEX (Database of Individual Patient Experiences) charity and its two multimedia websites, one for adults (www.healthtalkonline.org) and the other for young people (www.youthhealthtalk.org). Here patients, carers, health professionals, and others can get reliable information about various disorders and see and hear other patients talking about their illness.

“Part campaigner, part stalker”

This May, Ann received the BMJ Group’s communicator of the year award (*BMJ* 2011;342:d1824). She was too ill to attend the ceremony but was represented by her husband and the actor Hugh Grant, whom she had coerced into supporting her website. Indeed, he described himself as being her slave, as many of us were, in the nicest possible way. As Hugh Grant said, she seemed to him to be “part doctor, part campaigner, part stalker.”

I first met Ann in 1965 when we arrived at St George’s Hospital Medical School at Hyde Park Corner in London for our clinical training. She was small, dark, pretty, and eager. One of very few women back then, she sat in the front row, a north London grammar school girl. It was no surprise that she was in the top of our year when we qualified in 1968. We did medical house jobs together, on call in the residence for six months. She had just a weekend or two off to go home to Klim McPherson, a biostatistician and epidemiologist, whom she had married earlier that year. Ann went on to train part time, one of the first women to do so. Indeed almost all of her career

was spent working part time, while bringing up her children—and doing other things.

After house jobs our professional paths diverged, hers to train as a general practitioner at the Cavendish Practice in Kentish Town. Then,

after moving to Oxford in 1976 and some dalliance with dermatology, she settled down as a partner in the 19 Beaumont Street practice, where she worked until 2008. Soon she became well known to the hospital consultants after she telephoned a haughty registrar to insist that they admit a jaundiced woman with she said, correctly, glucose-6-phosphate dehydrogenase deficiency. (Ann had had the wit to discover that the woman had visited a “pick your own” farm and had eaten too many broad beans.) On behalf of her patients she made good use of her reputation in the hospital as a general practitioner not to be messed with.

Ann’s passions were her work and her family. She leaves an inheritance that will not be forgotten: the gratitude of her Oxford patients; the readers of her books; the users of the expanding DIPEX websites, which she has left in good hands along with the embryonic Oxford Health Experiences Institute, for which she set up a fund in her name (<http://bit.ly/iRNOFC>); her husband Klim; and their three children, Sam, Tess, and Beth.

Charles Warlow

Ann McPherson, general practitioner (b 1945; q 1968, London), died on 28 May 2011 from pancreatic cancer.

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Watch an interview with Ann McPherson on bmj.com.

See **BLOG**, p 1245



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