

# MJA NEWS

The newsletter of the Medical Journalists' Association

December 2010/January 2011



## MJA Open Book Awards 2011 – what books do you recommend?

The MJA Open Book Awards are in their sixth year in their present form. Entries are growing and there are signs they are at last attracting the big-name writers. *Philippa Pigache* reminds you of the entry criteria.

**H**ave you published a health/medical book this year (March 2010 to February 2011)? Have you read a really good health/medical book published this year? If you have please tell the organisers of the MJA OBA so that the publishers can be invited to enter it. Awards need high-profile authors to increase their prestige and profile. Please help us ensure that the health books in the headlines are also in the MJA Open Book Awards. (Email: [secretary@mjak.org](mailto:secretary@mjak.org))

As always, prestigious judges have been recruited, from among previously shortlisted OBA authors, from major medical journals and from published MJA members. This year the specialist readership section for medical books aimed at professional readers, will be judged by the 2009 Award winner, Dr Ruth Richardson, and MJA member and author, Dr Colin Brewer. Colin is a specialist in the fields of psychiatry and addiction, was a columnist for *GP* for many years, and now writes occasional pieces for national broadsheets and weeklies. He is working on a book about the influence of religious and secular ideologies on medical practice. Ruth is an interdisciplinary historian with particular interests in literature, history, the visual



Ruth Richardson (top left), Sandra Hempel (top right), Colin Brewer (bottom left), Adam Wishart (bottom right)

arts and medicine, and a senior visiting research fellow at the University of Hertfordshire.

The non-fiction, general readership section will be judged by MJA author and 2006 winner, Sandra Hempel, who also freelances for the broadsheets, and Adam Wishart, award-winning television documentary director, who has worked on the BBC's *Tomorrow's World* and *Horizon*, and is author of the acclaimed *One in Three*, a personal, historical and scientific look at cancer. We will profile the remaining four judges in the next issue of *MJA News*.

If you are an author, or if you are a keen reader, the basic criteria for OBA entries are: the books must be about health or medicine, and they must have been published in this country for the first time between March 2010 and February 2011.

Four of the awards are open to all authors, but there is a fifth, the Tony Thistlethwaite award, which is offered exclusively to an MJA author writing a non-fiction health book for the general reader.

Full details on how to enter can be found on the enclosed form. Even if you are not entering, if you have suggestions on books you think should be included, let us know. We would be particularly grateful for suggestions in the fiction category, which hasn't yet gained the profile of our other awards. The deadline for entries is February 18, 2011. Shortlists will be published in the April-May issue of *MJA News* and winners will be announced at an award ceremony (location to be confirmed) at the beginning of May, when all the excitement of a royal wedding has died down. ♦

### Contents

Open Book Awards	page 1
NoticeBoard	page 2
MJA Winter Awards	page 3
Claire Rayner remembered	pp 4&5
BookEnds	page 6
Jerry Cowhig & Elliot Philipp	page 7
Assisted Dying meeting	page 8

## NoticeBoard

### New members

**Susan McNulty** is the editor of *Practical Commissioning*, a monthly title aimed at GP commissioners. Prior to becoming editor in 2008, she was clinical features editor for *Practical Commissioning's* sister paper *Pulse*, having joined as a senior reporter in 2000. Before specialising in health journalism Susan worked for five years on local newspapers in Essex. She took a National Council for the Training of Journalists' post-graduate course in Sheffield after graduating in politics from the University of York in 1995.

**Emma Quigley** had just enough lab experience, following a BSc in biomedical science from King's College London, to realise that a career in research was not for her. She started in publishing in 2004 as commissioning editor for the *Expert Opinion* series – a series of review journals covering drug discovery from patents to clinical trials – and became senior editor in 2006. In 2008, Emma joined *GP* as deputy clinical features editor, and a year later was promoted to clinical editor, overseeing articles for the clinical section. Emma also writes a weekly blog on health and medical issues.

**Lois Rogers** covered medicine, healthcare policy and ethics for more than a decade at *The Sunday Times*, where she was medical editor and subsequently social affairs editor. Before this she was a news reporter working around the world for a variety of national, mainly tabloid, newspapers. Since leaving she continues to freelance for *The Sunday Times* and other publications, including *The Economist* and the *New Statesman*, and international specialist healthcare journals. She also advises drug companies and public relations agencies on communications, and acts as adviser and writer for the Department of Health, the Central Office of Information, other UK government agencies and international NGOs.

### More new members

**Jacqui Wise** has been a medical journalist for almost 18 years. She started as a medical reporter on *Mims Magazine weekly* before moving to *Doctor* where she became first science, then news editor. She next joined the *BMJ* as news editor, where she worked for three years, leaving after the birth of her first child. She now has three children aged 12, 10 and seven years. The whole family moved to Cape Town for six years, returning to England in 2007. She now works as a freelance journalist for the specialist medical press and women's magazines.

**Sarah Whitehouse** is a writer and editor at the Medical Protection Society (MPS), the leading provider of comprehensive professional indemnity insurance and expert advice to doctors, dentists and health professionals, with more than 270,000 members in the UK and worldwide. She edits *GP Registrar* and *GP Trainee* for trainees starting out in general practice in the UK and Ireland, and is assistant editor of *Casebook*, MPS's flagship member-journal. She has written features on expedition medicine, the role of emotion in the medical profession, equipment error versus human error, and how to be open when things go wrong. She also contributes to the medical press: *Pulse*, *GP Management in Practice*, and *InnovAiT*, an RCGP journal for Associates in Training (AiTs).

### MJA membership photo-cards now available

Those who were at this year's AGM will have seen samples of the MJA's new photo-membership card (see below right). It's very smart and business-like and these will be issued free to new MJA members and rolled out to existing members on a first-come, first-served basis.

The membership cards will be issued for a three-year period for any MJA member who pays his or her annual sub by standing order (this is actually a requirement of membership). Members who pay by cheque, or whose employer or company pays their subscription on submission of invoice, will have to pay the full cost of the card to the MJA: £5.50. If you would like one of the new membership cards you need to send the membership secretary, Maya Anaokar, who is ordering the cards, a head and shoulders jpg of yourself. You do not need to have a photocard if you do not want one (email: [mayaanaokar@hotmail.com](mailto:mayaanaokar@hotmail.com)).



## MJA Winter Awards 2010-11: all our own work

The MJA Winter Awards for medical journalism, judged on self-submitted work, were launched in September. Entries are in, judging about to take place, and the award presentation is scheduled. *Philippa Pigache* provides the back story.

In the beginning MJA awards were funded and organised by generous benefactors. The MJA had its own modest awards, for members only, in the summer, but the big shindig was in November. For 16 years these awards were run in conjunction with the MJA, but with the donkey-work and money provided by Norwich Union Healthcare (NUH). NUH did this with the help of an in-house team, plus a professional PR agency. It had a nationwide mailing list of programmes and publications thousands long to recruit entries, and it spent (by unconfirmed calculation) somewhere in excess of £20,000 per annum. Sadly, last year this largesse was withdrawn. It was a hard act to follow.

Although the MJA has built up the Summer Awards for journalism and campaigning, making them open and extending their range, they are made through members' nominations and votes, not based on the independent judging of individual pieces of work. The executive committee decided the Winter Awards must be replaced. And the MJA or, to be more precise, the Awards subcommittee, has done it all by itself.

The awards subcommittee planned the categories – very close to those of the NUH/MJA awards. Rachel Vrettos has raised the funds, nearly £10,000 and rising. Ashley McKimm designed and circulated the entry material, collected the entries, recruited the judges and tracked down the location for the presentation. This represents a major commitment of time and effort on behalf of committee members, all of whom have their own jobs to run, and who work on MJA matters in their spare time. They deserve their own award.

### MJA Winter Awards Presentation

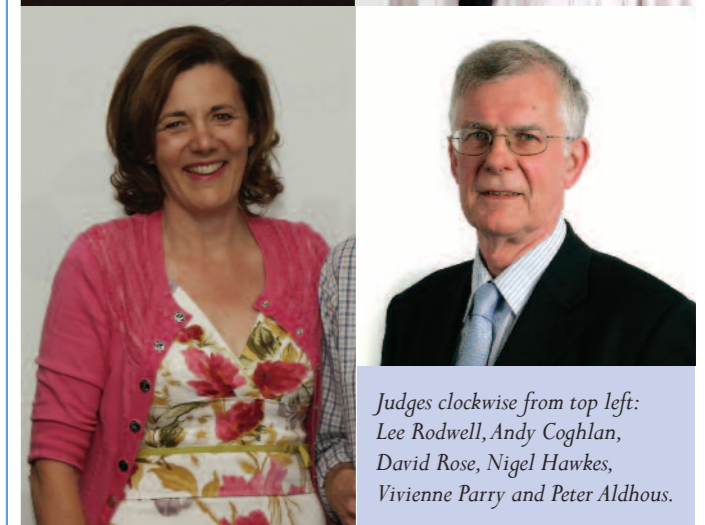
Wednesday, February 9, 2011  
 Conference Centre - Wellcome Collection  
 183 Euston Road, London NW1 2BE  
[www.wellcomecollectionconference.org](http://www.wellcomecollectionconference.org)  
 6.30 for 7 p.m.  
 Refreshment will be provided.

RSVP  
 Deanna Wilson  
 020 8343 4860  
 Email: [deanna@londonweb.net](mailto:deanna@londonweb.net)

Lyndhurst  
 10, Squires Lane  
 London N3 2AT

The Winter Awards have attracted some 120 entries over the 11 categories. They include material on NHS whistleblowers, on vaccination pioneer Edward Jenner, on the dire effect of the ABPI code on the hospitality now meted out to medical journalists at press events, on patient narratives and the quality of wonder in medicine.

Ashley has corralled an impressive panel of judges from all sectors, non-MJA members among them. MJA award-winner Andy Coghlan, and Peter Aldhous from *New Scientist*, award-winning documentary maker Sarah Barclay, Richard Warry – for more than a decade editor of the health index of the BBC news website before taking on over-arching responsibility for specialist journalism across the site – and David Rose who recently became an assistant news editor at *The Times*, after being health correspondent for four years.



Judges clockwise from top left:  
 Lee Rodwell, Andy Coghlan,  
 David Rose, Nigel Hawkes,  
 Vivienne Parry and Peter Aldhous.

They are joined by senior, experienced, award-winning MJA members: David Delvin, Nigel Hawkes, Barbara Myers, Vivienne Parry, Mark Porter, Lee Rodwell, Tom Smith, Geoff Watts and Celia Hall. Celia was a judge for the NUH/MJA awards so often it must feel like coming home to her.

They will draw up a shortlist which will be emailed and posted on the MJA website – [www.mjauk.org](http://www.mjauk.org) – in the New Year. Meanwhile, make a note in your diary. All members are invited to the presentation early in February (see box).

# Remembering Claire

Last October the MJA lost one of its most distinguished members: Claire Rayner, OBE. *Mike Smith*, who knew her well, went to the funeral and was actually present on the celebrated occasion when she demonstrated how to use a condom on live TV. Other MJA members also recall a journalist and campaigner who influenced so many lives.

**W**hat is success? To laugh often and love much, to win the respect of intelligent persons and the affection of children; to earn the approbation of honest critics and to endure the betrayal of false friends; to appreciate beauty; to find the best in others; to give one's self; to leave the world a bit better, whether by a healthy child, a garden patch or a redeemed social condition; to have played and laughed with enthusiasm and sung with exultation; to know even one life has breathed easier because you have lived, this is to have succeeded.'

These were the opening words at Claire's funeral on October 19. Ralph Waldo Emerson might have written them with Claire in mind. They could not have been better chosen for the glowing, energetic, enormous personality who had been my friend and mentor for 40 years.

*'It was one of my roles to reassure Claire constantly that she looked wonderful. I quickly learned to offer her (genuine) compliments without waiting to be cued. Indeed, I have never seen a large lady look quite so stylish as Claire, particularly so early in the morning.'*

*Judy Graham, editor of Claire's spot on TV-am in the 1980s*

We were accompanied in – but especially out – of the humanist ceremony by a New Orleans jazz band. This was, and characteristically so, Claire's wish. It was also her wish that only close family and friends should be present. Since she had many close friends, a goodly-sized gathering was there to cheer her on. The upbeat, humorous reflections presented at the ceremony – especially, but not only, by her offspring – confirmed the wide spectrum of her influence: young and old, rich and poor. No wonder all the media counted her death as news.

Claire joined the MJA some time in the 1970s. Former MJA chair, Ronnie Bedford, served on the committee with her (1976-78), just ahead of me. He says, 'One did not "meet" Claire Rayner, with or without an appointment. She materialised before you, sometimes preceded by a kind of foghorn "Hello" that spoke volumes in more senses than one.'

Ronnie's image conjures up my first meeting with Claire. Early in the 1970s I was working full-time for the Family Planning Association, and our consumer leaflets were getting public criticism. We invited Claire, plus some influential



Claire's funeral programme

clergy, onto a panel to oversee our work. I was there to meet and greet when she arrived. She flowed into the room like a yacht in full sail with the wind behind, spinnaker set. 'Hello luvvy, I'm Claire Rayner,' she said. 'Do you mind if I smoke?' And she took out a large cheroot. I was transfixed from then on. To quote Ronnie again: 'She smashed taboos and demolished dragons – and gathered devoted admirers.'

*'Her often hastily-scribbled pieces sometimes had – shall we say – a disdain for grammar and punctuation? The pieces were quietly groomed, with silence observed because no one was brave enough to confront Claire on the subject.'*

*Martin Sterne, Claire's early editor at Pulse in 1961*

You can read about the tough, East End childhood in the newspaper obits: a scholarship to the City of London School, being carted off to Canada in her teens, falling ill, coming back to England alone, getting into the Royal Northern School of Nursing and gaining a gold medal in her final SRN exam (see right). It's all in her last book, her autobiography (2003), *How did I get here from there?*, just republished in paperback by Virago. By that time she had published 94 books (fiction and non-fiction) in 22 countries. She started writing in the medical (*Pulse*) and nursing press in the 1960s. By 1966 she emerged in her most enduring persona as 'agony aunt', her columns continuing in *Woman's Own* or *Woman* until 1992. But she was also a natural broadcaster and presented many popular TV and radio programmes. In the 1970s she invited me to join her in a discussion on contraception on BBC's *Pebble Mill at One* which has gone down in history. Contraception was still risky stuff in those days. 'Don't mention condoms,' whispered the producer as we were about to go on air. 'Call them "male methods".'

*'Claire's outrageously liberal views trickled into Northern Ireland, where I was a teenager in the 70s, through women's magazines ... those quietly subversive words opened a crack in the façade of respectability that hid the human misery.'*

*Dr Mary E Black, BMJ columnist*

What a gift for our Claire! In those days programmes used to go out live and, as the cameras began to roll, she produced a

model of a large wooden penis and, looking directly into the camera, explained exactly how to put on the 'male method' of contraception. Behind the camera a red-faced producer mouthed 'OK; call it a condom.' It was just one of a trail of 'smashed taboos'. More memories of Claire on the MJA website, [www.mjauk.org](http://www.mjauk.org)

In 1996 Claire was awarded an OBE 'for services to women's health'. Her entry in *Who's Who* runs to over 700 words. The list of non-executive directorships, governmental committees, charities, honorary degrees and presidencies are witness to her enduring need to help others. She cared passionately about the NHS and the patient's point of view, and was a leading light of The Patients Association for over 30 years, becoming first chair, then president – a post she held to the end.

*'I remember one of her outspoken comments: couples could judge whether a relationship was successful or not, she said, by the times they farted together, rather than by the times they went to bed together.'*

*Ronnie Bedford, former MJA chair & science editor, Daily Mirror*

She told her relatives she wanted her last words to be: 'Tell David Cameron that if he screws up my beloved NHS I'll come back and bloody haunt him.' The Prime Minister was questioned in the House about Claire's words. His reply was drowned by ghostly howls from the Labour back benches.

She has her eye on you, Prime Minister. What a woman! ♦



*From the right, clockwise: a New Orleans Jazz band plays at Claire's funeral, Claire in her study in North West London, Claire between husband Des (right) and Alan Maryon-Davis at the 2009 MJA Awards, and (inset) Claire as a slip of a young girl, following graduation from the Royal Northern School of Nursing*

*Side Effects: A Prosecutor, a Whistleblower, and a Bestselling Antidepressant on Trial*, Alison Bass. Algonquin Books, £15.29p

In 1995, Alison Bass was a junior reporter covering mental health for the *Boston Globe* when she received a phone message from someone working in the psychiatry department of Brown University. It was something about alleged misappropriation of research funds. Little did she realise at the time that this tip-off would lead her on a long trail to uncover the darker side of the pharmaceutical industry. Her revelations over a period of several years lifted the lid off the way some sections of the industry were manipulating research, misusing marketing and running rings round government regulation to push unsafe psychoactive drugs on unsuspecting physicians and their patients. Almost single-handedly she rocked the industry to its foundations, changed the way it does things and became an international champion for better standards in the world of Big Pharma.

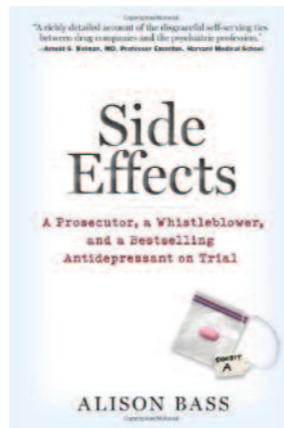
In *Side Effects*, first published in 2008, Bass turns her searing spotlight on the one-time best-selling antidepressant Paxil, and tells the story of how its makers, GlaxoSmithKline, misled physicians about its true efficacy and safety. She focuses on the way evidence about its side-effects on adolescents, particularly in increasing their risk of self-harm and suicide, was systematically withheld. And she does this by recounting the experiences of the 'courageous' university lab worker who blew the whistle on her boss, and the 'feisty' assistant attorney general who doggedly pushed through a landmark lawsuit

against one of the biggest pharmaceutical giants in the world.

Bass' great skill is not only her tenacity and attention to detail, but also her brilliant story-telling. *Side Effects* reads like a novel, a real riveting page-turner. She gets right inside the heads of her protagonists – their hopes, fears, frustrations, anguish, and ultimate elation. It's a rollercoaster with a happy ending – but not without meeting children and adults whose lives have been permanently blighted by the side effects of corporate greed, corruption and negligence.

This hugely influential book won the US National Association of Social Workers' Science in Society Award for 2009, adding to a long list of accolades for Bass and her contribution to mental health and wellbeing. Meanwhile, as she continues in her quest to root out misdeeds in healthcare, she is busily sharing her enthusiasm, experience and skills with the next generation of aspiring young investigative journalists at Boston University. ♦

Alan Maryon-Davis



*The Psychological Impact of Breast Cancer, a psychologist's insights as a patient*, Dr Cordelia Galgut. Radcliffe Publishing, £22.99p

Breast cancer has particular horrors for a woman because of the breast's significance as a sexual symbol, says Galgut, a practising psychologist who has had first-hand experience. And although each woman's response to the diagnosis will vary, too many people underestimate the commonality of the experience, she says.

Galgut was first diagnosed in April 2004, when 48. Seven months later a tumour was found in the other breast. She was 'lucky' in that it was caught early. Following surgery, she had radiotherapy and hormone treatment but no chemotherapy. She was surprised, nevertheless, by the way her world was – and continues to be – shaken to its core.

As one who has also had breast cancer, I appreciated this brave, intensely personal account, from diagnosis to the present day, revealing constant feelings of uncertainty, vulnerability and the fear of becoming sexually unattractive from surgical disfigurement. The author reviews attitudes to breast cancer historically; the process of diagnosis and treatment; the changes to self-image and to relationships and the problems of returning to work during treatment. I particularly liked the summary at each chapter's end of the most helpful suggestions provided by health professionals, friends or family.

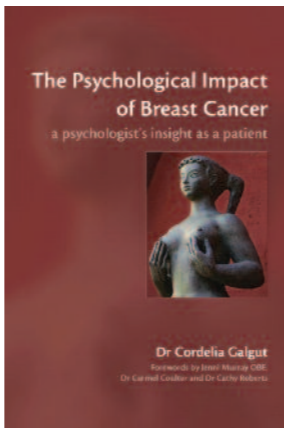
The final chapter, by consultant radiologist Sarah Burnett,

diagnosed four years ago, gives a vivid account of the experience of mastectomy, reconstruction and chemotherapy, including some salutary lessons for fellow health professionals. It might be useful to include a chapter on the psychological impact of a breast cancer diagnosis for men in future editions.

Galgut's overall message is for health professionals to adopt a holistic attitude, to refrain from trite comments, to listen, and show understanding of the psychological and physical impact of the disease on their patient. For friends the message is – please don't say 'Be more positive', but do keep your door open, accepting that breast cancer casts a long shadow.

This book is not a cheery read but it is honest, heartfelt and full of helpful insights. I hope it will be read by both women with breast cancer, and their families, friends and health professionals. ♦

Joy Ogden (author of *Understanding Breast Cancer*, John Wiley)



## The MJA is very proud of – former MJA chair, Jerry Cowhig, awarded MBE

Jerry Cowhig, a former chair and honorary secretary of the MJA, was named in the Queen's Birthday Honours list this summer. He was made a Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) 'for services to science'.

Jerry received the award from the Princess Royal at Windsor Castle on October 5, by chance his 65th birthday and the day of his retirement. For the past 15 years Jerry was managing director of IOP Publishing in Bristol, the publishing arm of the Institute of Physics.

After a brief spell as a university lecturer in nutrition, Jerry's first writing/editing job was in 1971 on the weekly part-work encyclopaedia, *Mind & Body*. Then in 1972, aged 26, he was appointed editor of the doctors' weekly newspaper *General Practitioner* at Haymarket Publishing, where he stayed for 23 years, progressing to editorial director of *MIMS*, *Medeconomics* and other medical titles, eventually becoming joint managing director of the medical division.

His move to IOP Publishing in 1995 took him from magazines to journals and from London to Bristol. During his tenure the company saw a large expansion in its scientific publications and now produces more than 60 journals. He served on many publishing bodies, including the International Association of Scientific Technical and Medical Publishers.

On receiving the award Jerry said, 'I feel highly honoured and at the same time embarrassed to take credit for the success of IOP



Publishing because it is down to a team effort.'

Jerry joined the MJA in 1971, becoming its 100th member. He served on the MJA committee for many years, as honorary secretary in the late 1970s and as MJA chair from 1982-86. The MJA recognised Jerry's contribution to journalism and to the association by voting him an honorary member in 2003.

Not many people know it, but Jerry is also a keen musician. He was a choirboy in his youth, and developed into a counter-tenor as an adult. Currently he sings with the choir at St Mary Redcliffe, Bristol. ♦

## – and distinguished doctor and journalist Elliot Philipp who has died

Elliot Philipp, who died in September aged 95, was a gentle Jewish gentleman who concealed immense distinction as a gynaecologist, obstetrician, surgeon, medical journalist and prolific best-selling author, with equal but unassuming charm. It was typical of him, always immaculate, that he should recall Sigmund Freud (to whom he was related by a cousin's marriage and whom he knew well) by recounting his advice: 'Always dress for your patient'.

Elliot graduated from Cambridge a month before World War II, and became a medical officer with RAF Bomber Command. He joined the Royal Society of Medicine's (RSM's) psychiatry section and became interested in the psychological effects of flying-stress on aircrew decades ahead of the current keen awareness of the long-term damage of warfare upon mental health. He also ascertained that eating carrots did not improve night vision.

But it was to gynaecology and fertility that he eventually dedicated himself. Working at a number of London hospitals and at Addenbrooke's (Cambridge), he researched blood groups and the Rhesus factor and led the way in the diagnostic and surgical use of the laparoscope. In the early 70s, he helped found the British Fertility Society, which described his work on in-vitro fertilisation, in close co-operation with Steptoe and Edwards, as 'a hugely influential contribution to reproductive biology'. Although Elliot retired from the NHS at 65, he continued to practise privately until 77 and to write and lecture into his 80s. He spoke French and German fluently and his flourishing Harley Street practice, focused on the French community, won him the *Légion d'Honneur*.

He wrote books under various names besides his own, as was the norm in the days when the GMC frowned upon doctors writing under their own names. One of a dozen of his books on sexual



Elliot at the 2005 MJA Awards, with David Loshak (back to camera), David's wife Maggi (left), Audrey Maxwell (on Elliot's left) and Sylvia Hull

relationships (he had observed a hole in the market at the time) was *The Technique of Sex*, about which he consulted Freud prior to publication. It ran to numerous editions and sold almost a million copies. In 1950 he became medical correspondent of the late lamented *News Chronicle* at a time when the species 'medical journalist' was still rare. He was an early member of the Medical Journalists' Association, formed in 1967, and continued as a regular at its meetings.

There could have been no more appropriate president than Elliot of the Hunterian Society, which seeks to pursue medical knowledge and learning through 'convivial companionship' over food, wine and conversation, followed by debate, deliberation and discussion. He was also a president of the Medical Society of London, and chaired the RSM's historical division. He remained as gregarious and companionable as ever into his nineties. ♦

David Loshak



The audience in the Medical Society of London includes Stephen Ginn (extreme right, front) and next to him Baroness Ilora Finlay. Inset: Baroness Warnock (right) and Dr Ann McPherson

The MJA discussed this contentious issue on November 25 at the Medical Society of London. Four speakers, 'widely respected for their integrity but divided by their beliefs', in the words of John Illman, who organised and chaired the meeting, spoke for and against modification of the law on assisted dying. *Stephen Ginn* reports.

Support for a change in the law came first from GP and MJA member Dr Ann McPherson. She is behind a new group called Healthcare Professionals for Change, set up to challenge the medical establishment's stance against assisted dying for terminally ill people, and to lobby for a change in the law. Ann's support of assisted dying is not academic; she herself is suffering from a terminal illness, a situation that, she said, made her 'really start thinking about death', and led her to publish an article in the *BMJ* explaining her views.

Ann told us that, during her working life, she had cared for many terminally ill patients, seeing many die in a way she would not wish for herself. In her view, doctors were ultimately unable to provide humane help for the terminally ill because of their inability to offer assisted dying. She wanted to see assisted dying incorporated into the palliative process. She said that she was only calling for a change in the law for specific cases: for the terminally ill who had clearly stated their wishes when of sound mind.

Baroness Ilora Finlay, professor of palliative care at Cardiff University, opposed this proposal, based on her faith in palliative care and pragmatic concerns about how assisted death decisions would be reached. For her there was a paradox inherent in the debate: increased discussion of assisted dying came at a time when palliative care was improving. She had practical doubts as to the accuracy of a terminal prognosis, the degree of internal and external coercion put upon patients, and the reliability with which patients in distress were able to make clear end-of-life decisions.

She related the case history of a patient who, with what was thought to be only days to live, had requested an assisted death in 1991, but was still alive today. She spoke of 'societal considerations', concluding that licensing assisted dying was not only about personal autonomy: 'To talk about it simply as a choice is to trivialise the enormous decision

we take if we change the law.'

Baroness Mary Warnock, who spoke third, is a respected moral philosopher who has expressed strong, sometimes controversial, views in favour of assisted death. She said many people wish for a good death, and some stockpiled the necessary pills, but this was ineffective because most deaths took place in hospital where medication was controlled. She was critical of doctors' resistance to change. 'It is simply derogatory to suggest the medical profession has the right to override the long-thought-out wishes of the dying,' she said. In her judgement, if someone wished to die, this moral decision should be taken seriously and no one else should be able to gainsay it.

She thought that the possibility some people might seek assisted death because they wished to unburden their relatives was in fact an honourable motive, to be admired. 'Why shouldn't I shorten my life for the sake of my children?' she asked. Nor did she accept that a change in the law would threaten disabled people, if they made their wishes clear. 'No one is suggesting doctors make the decision to end a life,' she said.

Professor Mayur Lakhani, chair of the National Council for Palliative Care, was the last to speak. In his estimation, 'the case for a change in the law has not been made'. He reminded us that in the past 10 years little over 100 UK subjects had sought an assisted death at Dignitas, while during the same time period six million had died elsewhere. Although he felt it was important for doctors to facilitate end-of-life care, this did not imply assisting dying. In contrast to the two speakers who spoke in favour, Professor Lakhani thought it was 'undignified to hasten death'.

The debate was opened to the floor and the audience posed questions and shared personal experiences. Someone asked about withholding medication, and Dr McPherson clarified the difference between giving medication to assist death (illegal) and withdrawing medical treatment (permitted) that resulted in death. There was general agreement that healthcare professionals found themselves as unprepared as lay people for the death of a loved one. Although there was no concluding vote, my impression was that most present were in favour of a change in the law. Debate continued over dinner, some saying that their opinion had been changed by the arguments they had heard. ♦

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