Contemporary history

David Morris—a paediatrician remembered

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I should like to pay my respects with you to David the man and the paediatrician. I suppose one should start conventionally, though there was little that was conventional about David Morris. His irrepressibly brisk and friendly manner and his carefully chosen clothes immediately made him stand out in a crowd, and the causes he espoused and his tenacity in pursuing them singled him out as exceptional, and anything but conventional.

After qualifying at the Middlesex Hospital he began his training in paediatrics at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital for Children in Hackney and subsequently worked at St Andrew's Hospital in the East End. In 1952 he was made Consultant in Paediatrics at the British Hospital for Mothers and Babies in Woolwich and at the Brook General Hospital in Shooters Hill where he established the Children's Department and worked closely with Dr Ashad Warley in doing so. At Woolwich, he set about to extend the work of Dr Harold Waller and soon became involved in those issues concerning the mother and her infant which were to preoccupy him during the rest of his professional life.

Though as an active clinical paediatrician, his proper and main initial concern was for the physical welfare of his patients, and for the precept put forward by Denis Browne, a contemporary orthopaedic surgeon, that 'the first thing about the mother and baby relationship is to ensure that they both stay alive'. David certainly did not stop at that. Separation of the mother from her newborn baby, the lack of emphasis on breast feeding, the care of children in adult wards, restricted visiting of hospitalised children, and above all, the lack of the best facilities and attitudes in the care given to disabled children that considerably handicapped them further, were the issues that preoccupied him more and more. He determined early on to protect the interests of the most neglected children, those who were emotionally and socially deprived and the physically and mentally handicapped.

He began to work tirelessly to create the best facilities at Goldie Lee Nursery in his own district which catered for children with special needs. He was not only preoccupied with improving the

physical facilities and conditions for these children, but he also endeavoured to see to it that the right people came to work with the children in need. David also set about to encourage people to adopt the right attitudes and to develop the ability to create the improvements that were most needed. In 1963 the first Save The Children Fund playgroup was established at Woolwich and from David's unit this extended to others. The importance of play in hospital was a matter that David made peculiarly his own but like so many of the innovations that he put forward, he made sure that his pleasure in the success of this project was shared with others so that the movement spread quickly.

David's ability to talk to children, to relate easily to them and to gain their confidence was unparalleled. One little boy said 'He is a nice doctor because he talks to me, not only to my mum and dad—and he can do hand-stands!'

He was funny and full of fun and inevitably drew children into responding similarly. He persuaded all of us to look at the whole child and not just at the

child's physical illness, and to regard the child as part of the family, not just as a sick individual. He was dedicated to helping parents to love and cherish their children: those who were disabled and those who were well.

David was a great communicator in many tongues. His fluency in French had led to his secondment during the war as a surgeon to the Free French Navy. He maintained and extended that fluency. He also made it his business to know a few welcoming phrases in many languages. So perfect was his pronunciation and so uninhibited his use of gesture, that not only did this make people he spoke to much more at ease, but also convinced them that he was prodigiously polyglot.

He made his junior staff feel important and made every effort to put them at their ease. He kept in touch with the progress of their careers and gave them every encouragement and help along the way. They always felt that here was someone they could come to with their troubles and be assured of good advice and reliable help.

David was honest enough to acknowledge that one could not know everything, and on appropriate occasions would refer a child with an especially difficult problem to one of his wide circle of friends and colleagues. One could be certain that he would select the best person, and parents and child patients would always be made to feel secure and reassured by the fact that David had chosen well and wisely.

He made best use of a multidisciplinary approach in patient care and worked closely with psychotherapists and social workers who were part of his team.

His many projects are almost too numerous to recount and even then I am sure that many of them are not known to me. I should like to mention only some that I have singled out as specially significant to me.

He established the Psychiatric Discussion Group for Paediatricians with Anna Freud at her home in Hampstead. A number of like minded people regularly came, including Ronnie McKeith who was a great friend and someone he recognised early on as being similarly motivated. This group included great names in paediatrics—Grahame Fagg, Dermot McCarthy, Tina Cooper, Bianca Gordon, Otto Woolf, Aidan McFarlane, Trevor Mann, and Anna Freud herself, and was even more famous outside this country, having attracted those paediatricians who were able to extend the role of child psychiatry to their own clinical practice overseas, for example, Marshall Klaus, Benjamin Spock, Henry Kempe, to name only a few. David was a founder member of the Balint Society and in his role as chairman and participant attended all the meetings

and guided much of the discussion. He had a durable involvement with the Association of Child Psychiatrists and Psychologists, and in this last year as its chairman, and true to his long held tenets, he tried to open its doors to anyone whom he felt would be benefited. He also had a close relationship with the workers on Mencap and was a staunch advisor and committee member.

In this respect it is important to mention David's ability to seek out in every individual, professional, friend, patient, that person's best qualities and to provide the catalyst which would allow these qualities to develop. Someone who immediately comes to mind in this regard, though as far as I am aware not known to David as a patient, was Christopher Nolan whose mother had the perception to coax his great talent out of his disabled, severely handicapped body and cause it to be revealed. Christopher as you know is a talented writer and his poem written in 1980 called 'Nominating' I think characterises the sort of responses that perceptive people will seek even in people who seem less able to give them. This was a principle that David was very well aware of:

'Pity the man in failure,
Love the man who's mad,
Make music with the man that's happy,
Marvel at a lonesome-child's hand;
Outstretched in those innocent fingers
Is a lively benediction's grace,
Make careful study, make mercy chime,
Love the tear, dry the face, watch the smile'.

David's work with disadvantaged children is exemplified by many activities and particularly by the Uphill Ski Club which he founded. For many years he would accompany groups of handicapped children on a skiing jaunt which he would personally conduct and supervise. He was chairman of the Nordoff-Robbins Music Therapy Centre and chairman of the Forum on Mental Retardation which he established at the Royal Society of Medicine. He was a member of the Medical Advisory Panel on Mentally Handicapped Children and remained active in this long after his retirement. In fact the British Council recognising his expertise asked him to visit a number of countries including Cyprus and Greece and countries in South America to advise on the creation of facilities for the handicapped.

David made his mark on the international and national paediatric scene. He regularly attended the annual meetings of the British Paediatric Association and was for some years a member of its council. He was a member and chairman of the Paediatric

Advisors' Committee of the South East Thames Region and got all of us to pull together and to plan in common for the future.

David continued to become involved in difficult and necessary causes: bereavement in children and their families and the need for paediatricians to become increasingly aware of the emotional aspects of bereavement. He produced with colleagues the report of the Royal College of Obstetrics Working Party on the management of perinatal death and participated actively in writing the booklet issued by the Stillbirth and Neonatal Death Society indicating those actions that should be followed on the death of a baby. This has provided a great deal of comfort to parents and indeed to the professionals who looked after them. He wrote and lectured extensively on this subject and on related issues such as the need to learn how to break bad news and to do so with warmth and affection. Not only gifted with exceptional ability to talk to people he was not afraid of showing his own feelings and did not restrain himself from physical contact when the occasion required the extra warmth and comfort that this would give. David I am sure lived by the precept that he set out in a beautifully written article on the bereaved child 'How Can We Help' and I would like to quote the last paragraph of this article:

'Children are honest and realistic and brave, this is what makes them so immensely attractive. If they are helped to face and recognise death, and, as far as possible, to understand their own feelings, and the very unhappy feelings of those around them, they can be spared some of the misery of unexpressed guilt, fear and confusion. And both they and we can learn how important it is to not to shrink from those who are suffering'.

I am sure that this is a lesson that David would like us adults and children to take to heart at all times and it is particularly apt for us to do so today.

David was a man of boundless energy. He played tennis for 20 years every other day until quite recently. He certainly could be described as being young at heart. He seemed even in his last years to have a youthfulness that many young people would envy. He loved life and was enormous fun. His optimism and cheerfulness never wavered even though at times he was extremely ill. In spite of this, and even in his last few years, there were occasions when it was possible looking at him totally to forget that he was at all in danger. His intrepid cycling took him all over London and he would pop up in the most unexpected places. David was irreverent and effervescent and took great delight

in laughing at a number of things—including himself on occasion.

He was puckish and provocative, never afraid to ask those questions that needed to be asked and he did not seem to mind what he said or where he said it, provided it was said in a good and just cause. I never found him to be waspish or hurtful and his comments were never destructive. Perhaps 'cheeky' was the most acerbic response that I ever heard him give to any tart comment directed against him. Everyone I have spoken to has used the same sort of adjectives to describe him including 'lovable', 'loyal', and 'charismatic'. He seemed to make all things possible and he had an ability to break the ice and to put people at ease. He always seemed to me to be delighted when something good was being done.

His manner and behaviour were courteous, though slightly disrespectful when pomposity needed to be put in its place. He had a generosity of spirit and unparalleled optimism. He had a great concern for the underdog. His vigil outside South Africa House, which was prompted by his daughter's involvement in the anti-apartheid movement, was fundamentally a demonstration of his deep concern for the welfare of the down trodden and this conversely was one area where he showed that any anger that he possessed was reserved for the tyrannical and cruel.

We extend our deep sympathies to his wife and family. They will all miss him but I feel sure that they will remember his full and fine life. I hope too that they will know that their loss is shared by us, and will have to be borne by the countless children and parents whom David cared for, the organisations he founded and nurtured, and the friends he captivated. All of us remember the twinkle in his eye, the cheerfulness he generated, the work he started, the attitudes he changed permanently, and the kindness and consideration he tirelessly sought to extend to those most neglected. These will remain the permanent legacies of his benign spirit.

I would like to end with the last line from the address that was made not too long ago at Jacqueline Du Pré's funeral service. I feel sure that you would agree that this sentence is equally apt when considering the life of David Morris as it was on that sad occasion:

'Let it not be said that life was good to us but rather that we were good to life'.

I am sure that this will be said of David—a dearly loved man.