Obituary

Dr Jim Birley
Formerly Consultant Psychiatrist at the Maudsley Hospital and President of the Royal College of Psychiatrists (1987–1990)

Forty years ago a group of psychiatrists training at the Maudsley Hospital were discussing the attributes of a good psychiatrist. They came to some sort of soggy consensus, but then decided to personalise it by asking each member to note down which psychiatrist they would choose to be referred to if they became mentally ill. There were over 50 to choose from but 77% of them voted for the same person, Jim Birley. So, even this relatively junior group recognised there was something particularly special about this unassuming man who shone forth more brightly than his many more flamboyant glitterati at the Bethlem and Maudsley hospitals. In the ensuing years, both authors of this obituary experienced ample reinforcement of the reasons why Jim was particularly special.

He came from a distinguished family, with his father, also Dr James Birley, famed for his original work on fatigue in pilots in the First World War, as a model to follow. Jim moved effortlessly from Winchester, where he was head boy, to University College, Oxford, before entering psychiatry, where he passed through the memorable, if occasionally disturbing, hands of William Sargent at St Thomas’ Hospital before going on to the Maudsley Hospital in 1960, where he stayed for the rest of his working life. But at the Maudsley he took a different course from many of his contemporaries. He was training to be a social psychiatrist, and good social psychiatrists needed to know their patients, so he became drawn towards the many problems of the patients in Camberwell.

Our impression at the time, perhaps influenced too heavily by juvenile cynicism, was that most of Jim’s colleagues regarded Camberwell folk as fodder for their personal advancement at the foremost psychiatric centre of excellence, and the trials and troubles of local residents were not of nearly as much interest as their psychopathology. But Jim never thought of personal advancement in this way. As a budding social psychiatrist he needed to understand all their problems in context, and he was the first consultant at the Maudsley Hospital to argue the case for a catchment area for the hospital, founding the Southwark Association for Mental Health, and putting great energy into developing a day centre in context, and he was the first consultant at the Maudsley Hospital to argue the case for a catchment area for the hospital, founding the Southwark Association for Mental Health, and putting great energy into developing a day centre.
Even when he retired altogether 3 years ago because of the progression of Alzheimer’s disease, he could still be roused to protest at perceived inequities and unfairness: ‘I’ve got Alzheimer’s you know, but some things still get through and I can still get angry’. And so he was, to the end, a fighter for the rights and values of the disadvantaged, whether caused by mental illness, political abuse or just plain unfairness, and we are blessed that he never lost his dominant place on the higher ground.

Jim Birley loved and lived in Herefordshire. He is survived by his wife, Julia, their son and three daughters.

Dr Jim Birley, born 31 May 1928, died 6 October 2013.


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**Federation Global Initiative on Psychiatry Jim Birley Scholarship**

In honour of its late Past Chairman Dr JLT Birley, the Board of the Federation Global Initiative on Psychiatry (FGIP) has decided to establish a Jim Birley Scholarship for young mental health professionals and other stakeholders who have shown exemplary commitment to issues of human rights in mental health. The scholarships are to be used for a cause decided by the winners that contribute to the strengthening of human rights in the field of mental health. The first award ceremony is planned for 2015.

FGIP is asking friends, colleagues and others interested to contribute to the establishment of this scholarship.

For more information:

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