



# OBITUARIES

## Walter Werner Holland: pioneer of European public health

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London, UK



Walter Werner Holland was professor of clinical epidemiology and social medicine at St Thomas' Hospital from 1968 to 1994. He was born into a Jewish family in Czechoslovakia, and his father, who had previously helped Germans fleeing the Nazi regime, left for England immediately after the German occupation of Prague in 1939. By switching trains in Germany he crossed the border out of the country in a train that was not thoroughly searched. Soon after, Walter and his mother followed. Other family members were not so lucky; his grandmother perished in Theresienstadt concentration camp. Despite initially speaking little English, he was an accomplished student at Rugby School and subsequently at St Thomas' Hospital Medical School. His interest in research was kindled when he was among a handful of students in his year to be selected for an intercalated BSc in physiology, graduating in 1951 and, subsequently, MBBS in 1954.

During national service with the Royal Air Force, Walter was posted to the Central Public Health Laboratory Service to work on vaccines against adenoviruses, but, in what would prove a serendipitous mistake, the manufacturers inadvertently destroyed a batch of vaccine, and he was offered the chance to investigate the 1957 influenza epidemic. He was working with Corbett Macdonald, and this introduction to epidemiology stimulated an interest that led to a Medical Research Council fellowship with Austin Bradford Hill and Donald Reid at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and two further years in the department of epidemiology at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, USA.

In 1962 Edward Sharpey-Shafer recalled him to St Thomas' as senior lecturer in social medicine. He directed the new department set up in 1964 and the Department of Health's Social Medicine and Health Services Research Unit from 1968 until his retirement in 1994. In retirement he continued working, mainly at the London School of Economics, where Brian Abel Smith had first invited him to lecture in the 1960s.

### Influencing hospital design

The first part of Walter's career focused on chronic disease and, in particular, respiratory disease in children. He took a hands-on approach, spending one evening a week visiting the families participating in his studies and analysing the data on the first primitive computers. In the mid-1960s his focus shifted. St Thomas' was being rebuilt, and he was determined to ensure that the new facility reflected the health needs of the local population in Lambeth. This led him to create the first health services research unit in the UK. After his work on the new St Thomas' he was invited to advise on other new hospitals, at Frimley Park and in Bury St Edmunds. Their designs were informed by a series of studies, ranging from epidemiological assessments of the health needs of the surrounding population to a randomised controlled trial of early discharge. This work also brought him into contact with the messy world of policy, leading him to note that "There is one very major thing that you forget—that is, that politicians themselves haven't got the faintest clue about most of this." However, he carefully cultivated his links with civil servants, ensuring that evidence was at least heard, even if not always acted on.

He was never afraid to challenge perceived wisdom. His research on air pollution challenged the view that it was a major cause of chronic bronchitis at the levels seen in the UK in the 1970s. His trial of multiphasic health screening found major problems with a procedure that was thought to be beneficial, causing private health providers to become incandescent. BUPA was especially cross when he revealed that they were charging £75 for a suite of tests that cost them £12. Similarly, his work on the government's resource allocation working party was very unpopular in the constituency in south London where he lived, when it became clear that it would lose considerable amounts of funding.

## European collaboration

Unsurprisingly, given Walter's personal history, he was committed to collaboration within Europe. He maintained an extensive network of collaborators across the continent at a time when travel and communication were far more difficult than now. As chair of the European Commission's panel on epidemiology and social medicine from 1977 to 1994, he did more than anyone else to raise the status of these disciplines at a European level. His leadership of two editions of the *European Community Atlas of Avoidable Mortality* provided a graphic illustration of the natural laboratory provided by Europe's diverse health systems. Its findings stimulated numerous research questions and provided the basis for what is now a thriving European health services research community. Understandably, he was horrified by Brexit and the damage it is doing to his adopted country.

Walter was not just a researcher. He was also a highly regarded teacher and mentor. When he retired there were 27 senior academics around the world who had spent substantial time in his unit and another 43 who held senior posts in government departments or international organisations such as the World Health Organisation or World Bank.

Walter received many honours in the UK; he was president of the Faculty of Public Health and appointed CBE in 1993. Overseas he had honorary degrees from both Berlin and Bordeaux, the medal of distinction from Pavia University, and the Solomon Neuman medal from the German Society of Social Medicine. A member of the Society of Scholars of Johns Hopkins University, he was recognised as a "Hero of Public Health" in 1991 on the 75th anniversary of Johns Hopkins's School of Hygiene and Public Health. From 1987 to 1990 he was president of the International Epidemiological Society. He leaves his wife, Fiona; three sons, Peter, Richard, and Michael (two of whom are medical practitioners); and seven grandchildren.

## Biography

Walter Werner Holland (b 1929; q St. Thomas' Hospital Medical School, 1954; CBE, MD, FFPH, FRCP, FRCPath), died from prostate cancer on 9 February 2018

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