

# James McCormick

James McCormick was one of the 'abominable no-men' who were critical of medicine's involvement in health screening. He preferred to be known as a sceptic and felt that the role of science in medicine was to place limits on our ignorance and to curb our enthusiasm to do good at all costs.

He was sceptical of the population approach to health and feared coercion of the individual by forces hell-bent on doing good. He had a view that individual patients had a right to harm themselves in the pursuit of happiness, provided they did not harm others. He was supported and indeed influenced by a young Petr Skrabanek for whom he provided a liberal intellectual base in Trinity College, Dublin. His relationship with Skrabanek was rich and fruitful. Neither saw the need to get involved in primary research as they saw themselves moderating the frenetic growth of inadequately conducted studies.

James wrote widely and well, always seeming to fear that what humanity existed would be eroded by poorly thought out science and evidence that disadvantaged the individual. He reserved his admiration for the personal doctor who could tailor medical knowledge to the individual patient. He was critical of general practice research, often citing Marshall Marinker's opinion that it 'provided predictable answers to banal questions'. Given the choice between wisdom and learning James rated wisdom more highly. Medical education he felt, tended to overvalue training and undervalue education, the cultivation of scholarship, and the critical mind.

We will be putting a selection of his papers on our website later in the year for colleagues who want to read considered, scholarly essays that often swam against the prevailing tide.

His funeral service ended with his own commendation:

*The timer of my life has nearly run its course*

*I would the alarm should rudely break the silence*

*With no hesitation, with no pause, no lingering doubt*

*Although its progress be remorseless and unstopped.*

*I retain the right to hope that time is left,*

*Time to love, time to talk*

*Time to see my children's children grow.*

(James McCormick, 1999).

He is survived by his wife Bidy, four children, and 12 grandchildren.

## Tom O'Dowd

\*\*\*\*\*

'Still enjoying life', said James McCormick's Christmas card a month ago. 'I'm sorry I'm not here,' says his familiar, courteous voice on the answerphone today. Soft and brown and welcoming, like Guinness, 'Please leave a message'. So I will.

You were one of the kindest and wisest men I have ever known. Your address to the Harrogate Spring meeting (zero rated for those ridiculous educational points) was one of the key events of my life. 'It is GOOD to be plump,' you said, infecting with your precious 'scepticaemia', 'Anyone who is fat enough to be at risk doesn't need to be told, they know it already. You don't have to work out their body mass index — you LOOK AT THEM!'.

Then at the 1994 Spring meeting where you contributed so much to my Paradox of Progress session. 'Poor people don't need health initiatives, THEY NEED MORE MONEY!' That evening meal afterwards on HMS Warrior, laughing at Sunil Bhanot's clowning, three loose cannons between the great black guns. Your foreword for my book, which I think you understood better than I did. Your bravery to speak your mind, 'If doctors are not prepared to get out of bed, they should forfeit their special position.' Your courage to be a father figure, in a world which tells doctors to be plumbers.

Those words of Theodore Fox you loved to quote:

*'Life itself is not the most important thing in life,*

*Some cling to it as a miser to his money and to as little purpose,*

*Some risk it for a song, for a hope, for a cause,*

*For wind in their hair.'*

**James Willis**