

Out Of Hours

Helen Lester:

an appreciation



When Helen Lester gave the James Mackenzie lecture last November she knew that her life was nearing its end. But typifying the woman and her approach to her work, always wanting to do more and different things, she rose to the occasion in her inimitable, compelling manner.

Helen was born on 17 November 1961 and graduated in 1985 from the University of Wales in Cardiff, where she met her much loved and loving husband, Huw, tellingly winning medical school prizes in both psychiatry and general practice. She completed her training in South Glamorgan with a distinction in the MRCGP and the Syntex prize for her research project: a sign of things to come. She joined the Lee Bank Group Practice in 1991, developing its undergraduate and postgraduate teaching and creating a service for people with serious mental illness and depression; the focus of her future research.

She was awarded her first research fellowship by the RCGP Midland faculty in 1995, and a Sheldon fellowship in 1997 enabled her to undertake an MA in sociological research methods at Warwick. She completed her MD in 2000. In the following 12 years, Helen went on to achieve what most of us can only dream about.

As a senior lecturer in Birmingham, followed by an NIHR Career Scientist award, Helen developed her research programme on people with severe, enduring mental illness, and built up a devoted research team. She became nationally and internationally known for her work on quality improvement, health inequalities, the development of primary care mental health, and the interactions between research, policy, and clinical practice.

She was promoted to professor in Birmingham in 2006, a year in which she won the RCGP Boots Research Paper of the Year and the RCGP John Fry awards, and then moved to a Chair in Manchester to work in the National Centre for Primary Care Research and Development. Helen's interest in health policy extended beyond the academic, and to the majority of GPs she was best known for her work on the Quality and Outcomes Framework. She became an external contractor for NICE, developing and piloting clinical indicators and advising on cost effectiveness, thresholds, and points. Only weeks before she died, Helen was instrumental in ensuring that the team

she had built would be able to continue this work as a result of another successful bid to NICE.

Helen was very loyal to the organisations she loved, in particular the Society for Academic Primary Care, where she made her mark as Chair by taking the major step of holding a joint conference with RCGP in October 2012 in Glasgow. She pulled out all the stops in her Stella McCartney dresses. Her other love was 'the College', where she was a major figure, as an elected member of Council and also as Chair of the Clinical Innovation and Research Centre. Leadership came naturally to Helen and with that leadership the enjoyment of helping others achieve their ambitions. The SAPC condolence book bears testimony to that special ability: to make people feel listened to and empowered.

In 2011 Helen moved back to a chair in Birmingham to further develop her research and to spend more time with friends and family. As she became more unwell, she unflinchingly tied up all the loose ends, ensuring a seamless handover of her projects and responsibilities. She continued to write papers, adding to what was already a prodigious bibliography. In November 2012, she was awarded an NIHR programme grant for the development and pilot trial of primary care based collaborative care for people with serious mental illness. This too has been left in good hands.

Helen died on 2 March 2013 and leaves the most amazing legacy for academic general practice. We must live up to her expectations. She also leaves her lovely family: Huw, Alison her sister, and her three children David, Emma, and Elinor. Thank you, all of you, for letting Helen enrich our lives as she did yours.

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