

OBSERVATIONS

BMJ CONFIDENTIAL

Simon Wessely: A man with “a joking seriousness”

In this series the *BMJ* asks the movers and shakers of the medical world about work, life, and less serious matters



What was your earliest ambition?

My parents were both teachers, so it was to change to subjects where they couldn't check my homework.

Who has been your biggest inspiration?

Anthony Clare, Anthony David, Anthony Soprano.*

What was the worst mistake in your career?

Not turning over the page in the part 1 physiology exam.

What was your best career move?

I couldn't decide whether I wanted to do general medicine, psychology, or sociology, so I went into psychiatry to do all three.

Who was the best and the worst health secretary in your lifetime?

I was alive, albeit only just, when Enoch Powell (yes, that Enoch Powell) made his “Water Tower” speech, criticising psychiatric hospitals and heralding a new era in mental healthcare. The worst? All those associated with the 2012 Health and Social Care Act will not be treated well by historians.

Who is the person you would most like to thank and why?

Sorry to be sentimental, but it has to be Clare [Gerada], or @ClareRCGP to give her preferred name, for marrying me.

To whom would you most like to apologise?

An old friend whose baby I once called ugly. It was, but that's not the point.

If you were given £1m what would you spend it on?

A bike that cycles itself up hills.

Where are or were you happiest?

With one son in Munich and the other in Amsterdam (Chelsea fans will know what I am talking about).

What single unheralded change has made the most difference in your field in your lifetime?

In my life: the invention of the cash point. In my field: the 2007 white paper *Mental Health: New Ways of Working for Everyone*—unfortunately the difference has been negative, as it led to marginalisation of the psychiatrist within the multidisciplinary team and had a role in the profession's recruitment difficulties.

Do you believe in doctor assisted suicide?

No. All doctors, not just psychiatrists, have a duty to reduce the risk of suicide by better management of pain, distress, depression, and so on, not to assist it.

What book should every doctor read?

Simon Sinclair's *Making Doctors: An Institutional Apprenticeship*, an anthropological look at medical training.

What poem, song, or passage of prose would you like mourners at your funeral to hear?

Aretha Franklin singing “Think” from the soundtrack of *The Blues Brothers*. The line “I ain't no psychiatrist, ain't no doctor with a degree” should raise a smile.

Biography

Simon Wessely is a psychiatrist who is unafraid to investigate conditions that excite great passion, such as chronic fatigue syndrome and Gulf war syndrome. He is professor of psychological medicine at the Institute of Psychiatry in London and consultant adviser on psychiatry to the British Army. His tin hat came in handy when he was attacked for his views on chronic fatigue syndrome, which he believes has an organic trigger but can be perpetuated by social and psychological factors. He is sceptical of the value of brief counselling for those who have just experienced trauma, believing that most people have more resilience than they are given credit for.

What is your guiltiest pleasure?

Salami.

If you could be invisible for a day what would you do?

I am fascinated by what really happens behind the scenes when people are at work, be it barristers negotiating settlements, surgeons unwinding after operations, soldiers on a mission, police on the beat, politicians doing deals, journalists deciding what goes in the paper—any of the above.

Clarkson or Clark? Would you rather watch *Top Gear* or *Civilisation*?

I watched Lord Clark as a kid, but Clarkson is another guilty pleasure. Un-PC and not ashamed, even when he should be. But if you tell anyone I will deny it.

What is your most treasured possession?

My collection of books on the Spanish civil war.

What personal ambition do you still have?

To give something more back to my profession, helping the best students go for the best medical speciality.

Summarise your personality in three words

Clive James recently quoted an Italian poet as having “a joking seriousness.” I identified with that.

Where does alcohol fit into your life?

After 6 pm.

What is your pet hate?

To answer this question we need to do a deep dive and think outside the box, followed by a paradigm shift. Only then will we be world class.

What would be on the menu for your last supper?

Wiener schnitzel, cucumber salad, chilled Austrian wine.

Do you have any regrets about becoming a doctor?

Absolutely none. Within medicine being a psychiatrist is the best job in the world.

If you weren't a doctor what would you be doing instead?

The *Sliding Doors* question. I admire most historians, many journalists, and even the occasional politician.

*Respectively, the psychiatrist and broadcaster who died in 2007, the Institute of Psychiatry's professor of cognitive neuropsychiatry, and the lead character in the television series *The Sopranos*.

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