

Appreciation: Dr Charlotte Williamson OBE

Colleagues of patient activist Dr Charlotte Williamson OBE celebrate her life and work.

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Dr Charlotte Williamson OBE, who was instrumental in making patient voices heard by the medical profession, died on 18 December 2023 and is missed by so many. Here, she is remembered by her colleagues, Dr Patricia Wilkie OBE, Dr Helen Williams and Mitzi Blennerhassett.

Charlotte did much work with doctors. From 1978 to 1982 she was a member of North Yorkshire Area Health Authority, then a member of York District Health Authority from 1982 to 1992 and a member of York Health Services Trust (Board) from 1992 to 1997; she was vice-chairman of all the above for 20 years. For this she was awarded an OBE. She was also a member of both the Picker Institute Europe and Consumers for Ethics in Research (CERES).

Dr Patricia Wilkie OBE, President of the National Association for Patient Participation, writes: "I first met Charlotte at the Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP), where I succeeded her as chair of the RCGP patient liaison group. We became friends sharing ideas about the importance of including patients in discussions about their treatment and care, about how to influence doctors, other health care professionals and managers. We also wrote together.^{1,2} However, by 1996 doctors were increasingly taking the view that high standards of treatment and care required blending the views of doctors with those of patients.³ It was a view strongly held by Charlotte and described by her in 1992.⁴ For many patient activists, as Charlotte liked to call us, it was difficult to get listened to by doctors. Doctors listened to Charlotte."

Helen Williams was a consultant medical microbiologist involved in clinical audit at the College. Encouraged by the then-President, Professor Sir Roddy MacSween, we needed help from patient activists. Helen writes: "Charlotte was knowledgeable, very well read and able to command the respect of doctors. She was the ideal person to help establish patient/lay groups in the medical royal colleges. I was a sympathetic pathologist who saw the potential of having an RCPATH Lay

Advisory Group but needed help from patient activists. Charlotte was immensely supportive and encouraging to those doctors who were genuinely interested in the patient or lay perspective outside of the individual doctor-patient relationship. Establishing the structure and creating the environment that allows both patient activists and doctors to explore difficult issues and develop relations is not easy. Charlotte was unstinting in her guidance, wisdom, patience and help for the College to establish a Patient Liaison Group, now called the Lay Advisory Group, to do this work. Twenty-five years ago, having a patient activist attend council meetings and chairing a college committee was a novelty and not always supported by all medical colleagues."

"Charlotte was awarded the College medal in 2004. It was, for me, a great personal and professional privilege to know Charlotte and work with her, and I was pleased that we remained friends after we stopped working together at RCPATH. Charlotte's influence is ongoing as the evolution of the scope of doctors and patient activists working together grows in importance, and this is evidenced in her many publications and the respect she was held in by many influential doctors."

Mitzi Blennerhassett, patient activist and award-winning author of *Nothing Personal: Disturbing Undercurrents in Cancer Care*, writes: "Not only did Charlotte have a superb intellect and ability to work with and influence medical colleagues, she also had a talent for recognising skills in people who did not have the advantage of her own experiences in shaping healthcare. In the early 1990s, while running a cancer support group, writing and speaking out to try to improve patient care, I was invited to join the local community health council (CHC). Here I found Charlotte's patient-centred approach differed vastly from the views of local Trust managers and medical personnel. Charlotte even telephoned me to discuss health-related issues. We had the same aims and soon a close friendship was formed. At that time few doctors were willing to speak about cancer care from a patient perspective. But Charlotte was."

"When I became a member of the then newly established RCPATH Patient Liaison Group, Charlotte, as an experienced and knowledgeable patient activist, offered me support, but also took a keen interest in my patient advocacy work, being particularly complimentary about my writing, often encouraging me to write more journal articles. She also sent me her own drafts for review. Such ongoing encouragement helped boost my self-confidence. I greatly admired Charlotte for her honesty, integrity and intellect. However, I will remember her most for her kindness."

Charlotte's work as a patient activist began in the last century, but the affects of her advocacy still impacts patient experience today. She continued to publish^{5,6} and cared passionately about the quality of information for patients, which often requires additional honesty on the part of doctors; about patients having the information to make informed choices; about involving patients in discussion about their treatment and medication; and about respecting patients as people. Some problems are solved but the goalposts do not remain static. Charlotte's influence has enabled more patient activists to question those in power to ensure that the voice of the patient is at the forefront.

Charlotte was an inspirational colleague and a true friend. This tribute was written by 3 of her friends with the help of her husband, Professor Mark Williamson.

[References available on our website.](#)

Meet the authors

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