

Peter Richards

London medical school dean and innovator in medical education



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Peter Richards, dean (b 1936; q Emmanuel College, Cambridge, and St George’s, London, 1960), died on 29 September 2011 from complications of Benson’s syndrome.

Peter Richards, physician, educator, politician, and strategist, who has died aged 75, was known through his book *Learning Medicine* and the television series *Doctors To Be*. His major influence was on St Mary’s Hospital Medical School.

Learning Medicine, first published in 1983 and now in its 18th edition, as a reviewer said, avoided portraying doctors as superhumans and students as would-be swots, treating the reader with respect and the subject with honesty. Paul Cox’s gently witty illustrations reflected Peter’s ever present humour, hinted at by a deft word or a twinkle in the eye.

Adventurous ones

Doctors To Be, the 1992 BAFTA (British Academy of Film and Television Arts) nominated BBC television programmes, whose “fly on the wall” filming began in 1984, initially met with hostility from St Mary’s academic board, although “in the end the adventurous ones won.” Peter saw the programmes as documenting for posterity a medical education barely changed for a century but near extinction.

In 1979, while he was a consultant physician at Chertsey, St Mary’s invited Peter to become full time dean, but he refused: “It wouldn’t be good for St Mary’s to have a full time dean, and it wouldn’t be good for me, because I thoroughly enjoy clinical medicine.” Once clinical sessions were provided, he accepted the post, and 16 years later he was St Mary’s second longest serving dean. His guiding motto was “the harder the task, the keener the risks, the greater the potential satisfaction.”

Problems began immediately: “Hardly had I arrived when the vice-chancellor . . . tried to close St Mary’s down.” The battle was won by

the marshalling of the statistics and exploitation of influences—that is, the secretary of the Queen Mother, the patron of St Mary’s, informed the vice chancellor of her displeasure. Peter recognised early that multifaculty colleges were the future, and St Mary’s merged with Imperial College.

Elsbeth Heaman’s 2003 book *St Marys: The History of a London Teaching Hospital* captions a photograph of Peter alongside a portrait of Lord Moran as “The two ‘great deans.’” Both bolstered a student centred culture, self confidence, and an institutional identity. Peter knew that selection of students was crucial, and he read every university admissions form and interviewed applicants looking for character and motivation. “We took risks on able individuals with real potential who had not yet had a fair chance to show it,” he said. Many students wondered if they were “the dean’s risk.”

Despite political distractions, Peter contributed much to education at St Mary’s, not least by his omnipresence and encouragement of innovations such as the teaching of communication skills. His “profound respect for . . . general practice,” gained during his childhood in west London, observing his GP father’s “seven-day-week general practice, inner suburb if not inner city, through blitz, and flying bombs,” resulted in a chair of primary care and preregistration posts in general practice. Recognising that medical education should be evidence based, he initiated research studies, particularly the 1980, 1985, and 1990 cohort studies, last followed up in 2009, which, like *Doctors To Be*, followed students through medical school and long into their careers (see, for example, *BMJ* 1984;289:1201, 1984;289:1288, and 1984;289:1365). His manifold contributions included proposing the studies, unlocking filing cabinets, writing emollient letters to grant givers, and, for the first survey, digging into his slush fund, stapling questionnaires, and stuffing envelopes.

In his regular “dean’s column” in the *St Mary’s*

Gazette, Peter likened a dean to a conductor, extracting each player’s best and welding the entire institution harmoniously. He was delighted when at 7 am one day the domestic supervisor came into his office clutching a letter from Buckingham Palace announcing her British Empire medal. “For once,” Peter said, “I felt the honours system was worthwhile.” Despite being awarded Finland’s order of the white rose for services to medicine and education, Peter received no UK honour, which merely indicts that system.

In 1998 Peter was elected president of Hughes Hall, Cambridge, a post he held till 2006. In a “visionary, courageous, and slightly reckless” move, as described by an unnamed donor to the college, Peter pledged a million pounds yet to be raised toward the Fenner’s wing. Sited on the university cricket ground’s boundary, this successful five storey building, with its fund for occasional broken windows, should surely now be renamed the Richards Building.

Learning Swedish, and undergraduate travels and excavations in Scandinavia, particularly the Åland islands, eventually resulted in 1977’s *The Medieval Leper and his Northern Heirs*, which begins, “People are the theme of this book—people beneath the notice of history but for their disease.” Winning Cambridge’s 1958 Wallenberg prize in Scandinavian studies, the work eventually became the Royal College of Physicians’ 1989 FitzPatrick lecture.

The real dean

Physically, Peter was “a small, thin man . . . with the half-moon spectacles, cerebral intensity and eloquence of an old-style Oxbridge don.” His personality was not always apparent, with one long term colleague describing him as “an enigmatic man.” Many students admired him, one recalling his frequent visits to a seriously ill second year student, his enthusiastic support at rugby club finals, his quiet pride at the annual St Mary’s musical, and his dignity, courage, and humanity. The latter traits characterised him to the end of his life. Students’ feelings were manifest when, several years after Peter left St Mary’s, the new graduates, after being photographed with the titular head of the medical school, nipped around the corner to be photographed with Peter—“the real dean.”

Peter leaves his wife, Carol Seymour, whom he married in 1987, and his son and three daughters by his first wife, Anne Marie Larsen, whom he divorced in 1986.

Chris McManus

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