



# OBSERVATIONS

BMJ CONFIDENTIAL

## David Southall: Determined, honest, and anxious



### What was your earliest ambition?

To be a doctor or a vet.

### Who has been your biggest inspiration?

A priest in northern Sri Lanka I met during the armed conflict, who insisted on giving up his only bed for me (a plank of wood), talked with me all night, and showed a compassionate approach to all of those affected by the war. He left a lasting impression.

### What was the worst mistake in your career?

Moving to the University of North Staffordshire Hospital from the Royal Brompton Hospital/National Heart and Lung Institute. Many of the senior managers at Staffordshire—with notable

exceptions—didn't have an appropriate perspective on our clinical work into life threatening child abuse and the research into respiratory failure in infants.

### What was your best career move?

Returning to clinical work in paediatrics, after many years undertaking medical research relating to paediatric clinical physiology.

### Bevan or Lansley? Who has been the best and the worst health secretary in your lifetime?

Aneurin Bevan's globally important development of the NHS began four months after I was born, and he was the best. Subsequently, the private finance initiatives introduced by Conservative and New Labour ministers saddled the NHS with massive, long term debts, where money was used to build new hospitals instead of renovating existing buildings and supporting better trained, happy staff at all levels.

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

There are so many, each relating to the many scenarios I've experienced and continue to experience, that I can't answer this. But they know who they are, and I thank them all for their support.

### To whom would you most like to apologise?

The many vulnerable children I couldn't protect from abuse because I failed to foresee and prevent the powerful interference by the British establishment in the child protection and international advocacy work I was pursuing.

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

This is the easiest question. The international medical charity I work for, MCAI ([www.mcai.org.uk](http://www.mcai.org.uk)), has developed an approach to the scarcity of appropriately trained doctors providing hospital maternity and neonatal care in resource poor countries. This involves training experienced midwives in advanced obstetrics, including caesarean section. This task shifting approach is working well, and, with the support of the

**Biography**

David Southall, 68, is a paediatrician whose career was wrecked when the General Medical Council failed to deal fairly and expeditiously with a series of complaints made against him by parents. After a long legal battle he was eventually cleared, but the GMC's reputation has never fully recovered. His clinical work, using covert video surveillance, had shown parents deliberately injuring their children, triggering a vitriolic campaign against him that lasted 20 years. In the 1990s he worked in the former Yugoslavia treating children who were victims of the war, and on his return he started the charity now known as Maternal and Childhealth Advocacy International (MCAI).

World Health Organization, needs to be introduced in other sub-Saharan African countries. A million pounds would help to scale up and roll out this lifesaving programme: the need is very great, and financial resources are, predictably, limited.

**Where are or were you happiest?**

The mountains and seas of the northwest highlands of Scotland, where I moved to live six years ago and where MCAI is now based.

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

Understanding the importance of palliative care and the role of opiate drugs and other treatments in relieving suffering in dying patients, including children. However, these vital (and, historically, oldest) components of medical care have not yet reached most of those with terminal conditions in the poorest countries of the world.

**Do you support doctor assisted suicide?**

I don't think that it should be needed if effective, properly undertaken palliative care is available; unfortunately, such care usually isn't. The appropriate use of drugs such as morphine, naturally, but not wrongly, may accelerate death, and therefore I understand why so many doctors are reluctant to prescribe effective doses. So I see why there may be support for doctor assisted suicide, but I'd prefer to find a way of absolutely ensuring the availability of effective palliative care so that this option of last resort is unnecessary.

**What book should every doctor read?**

Any book by Charles Dickens. I like *Great Expectations*.

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

"Adagio for Strings," by Samuel Barber.

**What is your guiltiest pleasure?**

Not being able to control my immediate need to eat all of any bar of milk chocolate that's in the house.

**What television programmes do you like?**

The *Lie to Me* series starring Tim Roth, which, apart from the gripping storylines, is educational in spotting when someone's lying. And *Channel 4 News*, which covers the global issues that really matter.

**What is your most treasured possession?**

I don't hold value in possessions—only in people and dogs, especially border collies.

**What, if anything, are you doing to reduce your carbon footprint?**

I'm not good at this, largely because of where I live, as I need air transport from Inverness regularly to visit London and Africa. However, EasyJet seems to ensure that most planes I fly on are full, thus mitigating this somewhat.

**What personal ambition do you still have?**

To continue pushing the International Health Protection Initiative (<http://ihpi.org>) to advocate a restructured United Nations Security Council that can successfully protect civilians from armed conflict and prevent countries, especially those in the current council, from developing and selling ever more devastating weapons.

**Summarise your personality in three words.**

Determined, honest, and anxious.

**Where does alcohol fit into your life?**

I like alcohol but can fortunately also take it or leave it—although when I lived alone for many years I found this difficult.

**What is your pet hate?**

Can I have more than one? There are several: child abuse, the arms trade—and private medicine, which in the United Kingdom has fortunately caused less damage to those most in need because of the NHS. However, in resource limited countries, private medicine has been and is, in my experience, the most damaging cause of failure to provide lifesaving treatment for the vast majority of poverty stricken mothers, babies, and children.

**What would be on the menu for your last supper?**

My wife's cauliflower cheese, followed by prawn curry, followed by cake (any sort, as long as it's home made).

**Do you have any regrets about becoming a doctor?**

No, but the GMC, which is also a registered charity, continues to refuse to apologise for the harm it's done to so many doctors and their families, including mine. As long as the GMC continues to propagate injustice, the UK medical profession will continue to practise defensive medicine.

## **If you weren't in your present position what would you be doing instead?**

That would depend on the reasons. I would like, once again, to treat pregnant women and children in a war zone such as

Afghanistan, but I think that I'm now too old and too scared to do so. The extent of evil now pervasive in such settings means that humanitarian aid work is much more dangerous than it used to be. On a lighter note, I'd like to spend more time spotting whales and dolphins in the seas around where I live.