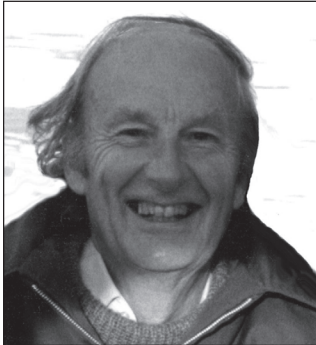


## Obituaries

### John Angus Black

*Polymathic paediatrician dedicated  
to ethnic minority needs*



John Angus Black (b 1918; q Cambridge 1943), died in his sleep on 21 May 2013.

When John Black landed by ship at Singapore five days after the Japanese surrender he was faced with an unsolved problem: restoring to normality starving and emaciated civilians and allied former prisoners of war. As the doctors who entered the German concentration camps had found, nobody knew what

diet was the most suitable, but too rapid a food intake might cause circulatory collapse and death, probably because of acute thiamine deficiency. The solution, Black and a colleague found and later published, was a graded diet starting with condensed milk, beaten eggs, sugar, and protein hydrolysate, together with multivitamins and antimalarials.<sup>1</sup> The striking results included a weight gain of 2.5 kg in a week (these captives had lost 16–18 kg on average) along with a great increase in morale.

Yet, despite rewarding service in the Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC) in India and Malaysia from 1944 to 1947, Black persisted with his ambition to enter paediatrics. During his clinical training at University College Hospital (UCH), he had been encouraged by figures such as Max (later Lord) Rosenheim and Arthur Watkins in Cardiff—where UCH was temporarily evacuated—and his ambition was confirmed by joining a special wartime residential scheme at Great Ormond Street Hospital. At this time, however, paediatrics was particularly badly served.

There were a few specialist children's hospitals in the big cities, but as large a county as Lincolnshire had no full-time paediatrician at all, and paediatric surgery was just as badly served.

Given that he had obtained the MRCP just before entering the army, Black was able to enter paediatrics at Great Ormond Street soon after he was demobilized in 1947, and then went to Zurich to do research with the renowned Professor Guido Fanconi, with whom he described a new syndrome. Subsequently he was appointed to a consultant job in Glasgow and then returned to Great Ormond Street as senior lecturer before securing a final consultant post in Sheffield. In Scotland he established a regional paediatric service throughout the whole of Renfrewshire and in his later appointments became particularly concerned with the health needs of children in ethnic minorities.

Black hated pomposity, not surprisingly entitling his book of wartime reminiscences *Rather a Mixed Crowd*—the dismissive term applied by the 'pukka' British officers in India to those in the

RAMC.<sup>2</sup> A later anecdote confirms his attitude. At one hospital he found the car parking spaces changed. The administrators now had the slots nearest the hospital, and the medical consultants those furthest away. There were no consultant slots left, so Black circled the car park and found that, although it was only 4 p.m., the chief executive was no longer there, though his parking bay was protected by plastic traffic cones. Without more ado, Black drove straight over these cones and walked into the hospital.

It was this hatred of pomposity, spurred by his experiences in India of the Raj, that underlay Black's awareness of the needs of less advantaged people. So when the Italian medical teachers left Libya he stepped in to help fill the gap. During Eritrea's war with Ethiopia, he was smuggled into Eritrea lying prone on the floor of a van. In Eritrea he advised on developing a children's ward, which had to be built into a cave, paying a follow-up visit the next year. At home he wrote a series of articles for the *BMJ* on the special needs of children from the ethnic minorities, articles collected together in a book, which went into a second edition.<sup>3</sup> What stands out is the directness of the text. Avoiding psychobabble and sociospeak, Black concentrates on practical matters, pointing out, for instance, that the needs of children of settled immigrant parents differ from those of newly arrived ones, while the medical problems of Afro-Caribbeans may not be the same as those of Asians.

Black's priorities were his wife and four children, but thereafter his interests were wide—archaeology, wild flowers, butterflies, gardening, photography, literature, India, cats, railways. He joined the local societies in Framlingham, where he had retired, taking to local and medical history with a passion. With his wife, he researched and published about a surprising epidemic of plague that had occurred in Essex and Suffolk just before the first world war. He loved travelling, often to exotic places. So he went to Antarctica when he was 90, and, while on a trip to Burma and a hospital he had known during the war, he was delighted to find the same broken wheelchair in the casualty department that had been there 50 years earlier.

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- 3 Black J. *Child health in a multicultural society*. BMJ Books; 1989.

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[Dr John Black was a member of the Editorial Board of the *National Medical Journal of India* and contributed a regular column 'Letter from London' from 1988 till 2005.

—Editor]