
Obituary



Edward Townley Downham, formerly Consultant Psychiatrist at Burnley, Pendle and Rossendale Health Authority

Edward Townley Downham was born in Warrington on 13 December 1915. He died in August 1996 after a long illness fought with great courage and determination.

He graduated MB ChB from Liverpool University in 1939. During the war he served in the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve as a Medical Officer, mainly in fighter command, and he left with a rank of Substantive Squadron Leader, Acting Wing Commander in 1946. His experiences during the war helped to give him a determination to practise psychiatry. He was particularly angry at the way occupational crewmen could suddenly be demoted as "lacking in moral fibre", when they were actually suffering from stress disorders.

He qualified DPM London in 1951, and MD Liverpool 1955 and was a founder fellow of the Royal College of Psychiatrists. He was appointed Consultant Psychiatrist at Burnley General Hospital in 1956, which by the end of 1958 he had converted from being a satellite of Whittingham Hospital in Preston, to a fully comprehensive district general hospital, part of the old Manchester Regional Hospital Authority.

Ted Downham was probably the last of the unsung pioneers in UK psychiatry. When I

arrived in Burnley in 1977, Ted had been running the show for 20 years. On the surface the unit was the product of a typical run-down mill town, with a main claim to fame of a successful football team. However, the Burnley unit was a lot more than a peripheral outpost in a converted workhouse. As part of an experiment in transplanting psychiatry from the asylum model to a district general hospital, Ted was breaking new ground, it was clear that this model would eventually have to be adopted nationally, as its logic was indisputable.

Although very much a generalist, Ted had a flair for exploring the unconscious by means of sodium amytal abreaction which enabled him to unearth repressed material for both exploratory and therapeutic ends. In sharp contrast to his psychotherapeutic skills he was also a pioneer in psychosurgery in the 1960s and early 1970s and many of his patients were invited to a regular Christmas reunion to celebrate their well-being.

But if his clinical skills were exceptional he was certainly no slouch when it came to administration. In those early days, psychiatry in a district general hospital was always bound to be the lowest of the low, ranking even below mental handicap when it came to funding. Ted's skill was to squeeze what he could out of the pot and then mix and match with a few SENs here and the odd SRN there, not to mention the occasional volunteer and 'therapist'. Somehow it all seemed to work and despite appalling consultant ratios, 1 to 80 000 when I joined, the service never clogged and always provided some solutions for all.

It would be wrong, however, to think that Ted was all work and no play. He had a wealth of interests, from fine wines to antiques and of course his beloved greenhouse. Fortunately he was able to enjoy a long and happy retirement, both in Spain and in Southport.

Ted retired in 1985, and he is survived by his wife, Dorothy, and his two sons, one of whom is a doctor.

M. A. LAUNER