

# Carol Brayne

## Wants to help save the NHS



PETER LOCKE

**CAROL BRAYNE**, professor of public health medicine at Cambridge, has pioneered the study of dementia in the population, launching two major longitudinal studies of the health and cognitive functioning of 30 000 older people. The results underpin our understanding of dementia, showing (among many other things) that dementia can occur without the expected changes in brain pathology and that such changes, when they do occur, do not invariably lead to dementia. Her studies provide the basis for planning long term care needs in England and have recently shown that, age for age, the prevalence of dementia is declining.

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

“Increased life expectancy. But on the horizon are changes arising from widening inequality and the introduction of market ideology into so many aspects of our lives, including education and the health service”

### What was your earliest ambition?

Possibly to be a librarian, the start of a lifelong love of books.

### Who has been your biggest inspiration?

Two people. Gerry Shaper, professor of clinical epidemiology at the Royal Free Hospital School of Medicine, for introducing me to epidemiology, and Bill Havad, an inspiring general physician, and so kind to juniors.

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

A prescribing error as a house officer—luckily with no effect on the patient.

### What was your best career move?

In retrospect, moving my MRC training fellowship to Cambridge; it was not obvious at the time but turned out to be a tremendous move.

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

Bevan was the best, although before my time. The Blair years were a great disappointment. No health secretary seems to have understood the importance of public health as a discipline at the heart of a socialised healthcare system that is affordable, equitable, and effective.

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

My mother, for bringing up her four children as a single mother, for suggesting that I consider medicine as a career, and for giving us all a love of the natural world and modern languages. Also friends, colleagues, and students, past and present.

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

My husband, for not mentioning him above.

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

It would depend on where it came from. Probably divided between our children and a charity (Practical Action).

### Where are or were you happiest?

Here and now. Not to forget many wonderful times with my family.

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

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### Do you support doctor assisted suicide?

In theory, with appropriate safeguards, yes. But I remain uneasy about the difficulties of implementing it in practice and the potential dangers, especially in the current economic and social climate.

### What book should every doctor read?

For a contemporary message, *The Shock Doctrine* by Naomi Klein (polemic but compelling) or Camus’s *The Plague* (with added epidemiology). But, if it has to be one, for its breadth of vision, wisdom, humanity, and enduring appeal, George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*.

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

Perhaps something from Verdi’s *Requiem*, despite having no religious beliefs.

### What is your guiltiest pleasure?

Doing nothing—lying in the garden with birdsong and the wind rustling the trees, or on a Norfolk beach watching the clouds and listening to the sea.

### Clarkson or Clark? Would you rather watch *Top Gear* or *Civilisation*? What TV programmes do you enjoy?

As a child I saw *Civilisation* and enjoyed it. Good BBC serials, such as Andrew Davies’s adaptations of 19th century novels. And *Cold Comfort Farm* with Kate Beckinsale was a sheer delight.

### What personal ambition do you still have?

To help save the NHS. It was the best system in the world, but constant meddling has damaged it badly and it requires an honest dialogue with the public about the implications of where we are heading.

### Summarise your personality in three words

After consultation with family and a wise friend: cautious, resilient, tenacious.

### What is your pet hate?

Pomposity.

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

My husband’s tomato tart.

### If you weren’t in your present role what would you be doing instead?

Something in sustainable development. It was only after becoming a public health physician that I learnt more about my grandfather FL Brayne. He was in the Indian Civil Service and advocated education for women, ending deforestation, the eradication of standing water, and the widespread use of mosquito nets.

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