

OBSERVATIONS

BMJ CONFIDENTIAL

Nick Black: Looking for a post at Arsenal

In the next of its series asking the movers and shakers of the medical world about work, life, and less serious matters, the *BMJ* spoke to the champion of PROMs (patient reported outcome measures)



What was your earliest ambition?

To be a film director (preferably Swedish, French, or Italian).

Who has been your biggest inspiration?

Phil Strong, one of the leading medical sociologists of his generation, who, despite his early death at 49, offered me a unique and challenging perspective that has influenced much of my thinking.

What was the worst mistake of your career?

It might prove to be answering these questions. I regret none of the knight's moves I've made, and I would encourage people not to be dissuaded from pursuing less predictable options.

What was your best career move?

Spending three years as a lecturer at the Open University. Working intensively with a biologist, economist, and sociologist, it allowed me to learn how to write, teach, and understand the perspectives of other disciplines.

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

The best was Ken Clarke, who understood the key underlying and enduring issues that make healthcare so challenging to get right. The worst was Andrew Lansley, for not understanding those issues and for wasting two precious years with unnecessary and distracting structural change.

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

Peter Watkins, my history teacher at school, for offering alternative possibilities, stimulating my lifelong interest in history, and introducing me to the social sciences. A few years ago I did thank him.

To whom would you most like to apologise?

Future generations, for what our generation has done to the environment.

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

Helping establish tidal energy projects, such as the Swansea Tidal Lagoon, in the hope of persuading politicians and the public of its potential contribution to saving the planet.

Where are or were you happiest?

26 May 1989: Liverpool 0, Arsenal 2.

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

Recognition of the essential role of the patient, without which the effectiveness of healthcare is limited and health systems will never meet the needs and expectations of the public.

Do you believe in doctor assisted suicide?

If we're serious about recognising patients' preferences and helping them make informed decisions, then we must be prepared to offer this. But perhaps more importantly, we must improve our assistance to those who are dying.

What book should every doctor read?

Anthony Powell's *A Dance to the Music of Time* (actually 12 books). As well as wonderful writing and sharp observation of people and relationships, it provides a view of the long, slow

Biography

Nick Black sprang to the NHS's defence to contest a claim by the Office for National Statistics that its productivity was in decline.¹ He is professor of health services research at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and a champion of PROMs (patient reported outcome measures) as a way to measure the quality of healthcare. He is no Dr Pangloss—as a member of the advisory panel for Bruce Keogh's 2013 review of 14 hospitals with higher than expected death rates, he opined that other hospitals could have similar or worse problems.

trajectory of time, which is increasingly necessary to counteract the misplaced and increasing tyranny of 24/7 urgency.

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

Nina Simone's *My father*. If there were still dry eyes, the haunting beauty and sadness of her voice recollecting times past would reduce people to tears.

What is your guiltiest pleasure?

The schadenfreude when "I told you so" comes true.

If you could be invisible for a day what would you do?

See what my elderly mother is actually eating.

Clarkson or Clark? Would you rather watch *Top Gear* or *Civilisation*?

Civilisation, if *Borgen* was not available.

What is your most treasured possession?

An Arsenal season ticket.

What personal ambition do you still have?

To write a novel (along with everyone else).

Summarise your personality in three words.

Calm; optimistic; exacting.

Where does alcohol fit into your life?

Wine most (all) evenings.

What is your pet hate?

People engrossed in mobile gizmos, walking down the street ignoring everyone.

What would be on the menu for your last supper?

Thai red lentil soup; grilled halloumi (with lime vinaigrette), garlic roast potatoes, and rocket; and summer pudding with Greek yoghurt.

Do you have any regrets about becoming a doctor?

None—what's not to like about helping people and being well paid and respected?

If you weren't a doctor what would you be doing instead?

An architect restoring old buildings (assuming Arsenal didn't want me as manager).

1 Black N. Declining health-care productivity in England: the making of a myth. *Lancet* 2012;379:1167-9.

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2014;348:g1107

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