

## Obituaries

### DR. ROBERT HELLER (1907-1980)

It is with deep regret that we record the death on 20 March 1980 of Dr. Robert Heller, for many years a most valued friend and associate of the Wellcome Institute.

Robert Heller was a native of Vienna forced to flee Austria after a period of imprisonment by the Nazis. His basic medical education had been completed in Austria and was followed by a period of physiological research in Italy. Returning briefly to his homeland he escaped to England in 1938 and devoted the rest of his professional life as a physician to his adopted country. Passionately devoted to the ideals of the National Health Service he was always able to view the peculiarities of the British and their institutions with a clear-eyed but deep affection which he strove, unsuccessfully, to hide behind a sharp and even biting wit.

Robert's concern with the history of medicine had been fostered by regular periods of study leave and became an almost full-time occupation after his retirement in 1972 as consultant chest physician to the Hounslow Chest Clinic and the West Middlesex Hospital. His own medical practice had been inspired by the idea of service and it was a natural progression for him to study those aspects of history which showed medicine in the service of society. He was a member of the Executive Committee of the Society for the Social History of Medicine in 1974-75, becoming its chairman in the latter year. His studies resulted in a number of well-researched, meticulously documented papers, most of which appeared in this journal. In 1975 we published his study of Johann Christian Reil's training scheme for medical auxiliaries (vol. 19, pp. 321-332). This was followed by "Priest-doctors" as a rural health service in the Age of Enlightenment', (1976, 20: 361-383). French history engaged his attention and he produced a study of "Officers de santé"; the second-class doctors of nineteenth-century France', (1978, 22: 25-43). His great hero (characteristically presented as lacking in most of the heroic virtues) was Johann Peter Frank, author of the *Medizinische Polizei*.

Robert Heller's many friends will remember his contributions to medical history in the context of his quite extraordinary courage and cheerfulness in the face of considerable personal adversity. Major surgery, followed by a stroke, left his health precarious and his sight in particular severely impaired. The unexpected illness and death of his wife Ann was a crushing blow borne with a fortitude which earned him the admiration and respect of everyone who knew him. He continued to work to the end, on J.P. Frank and by encouraging an ambitious pilot project to investigate the survival of indigenous medicine in immigrant communities. His last published paper on 'Educating the blind in the Age of Enlightenment', (*Med. Hist.*, 23: 392-403) was surely not only a worthwhile piece of historical research but a characteristically defiant reaction to a personal affliction.

He will be greatly missed and medical history will be the poorer without him.

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