

Obituary

Robert Wenlock (1945–2008)

(First published online 10 September 2008)

Bob Wenlock spent much of his professional life as a key member and the only non-medical nutritional professional in what was the Nutrition Unit of the Department of Health and Social Security (later just Department of Health; DH). Earlier in his career, in 1984, he had successfully made the awkward transition from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF), where he had been a scientist since 1973. Thus his professional contributions spanned a prolific period of development for nutrition policy best characterised by an increasing integration of purpose between the DH and MAFF. This fruitful collaboration replaced the previously cool relations that had existed between the two Government departments since the end of the Second World War and was facilitated in no small part by Bob's intimate knowledge of the workings both of MAFF and the DH.

Bob was a major contributor to the development of scientific advice from the Committee on Medical Aspects (COMA) of Food and Nutrition Policy, such as on dietary reference values. For two decades in the 1980s and 1990s his name was a fixture in the front pages of the several influential reports issued by COMA, and published by Government, in the familiar 'Grey Book' series (Reports on Health and Social Subjects) that began with the inception of the Ministry of Health in 1919. In the same way, his face – accompanied by the characteristic mechanical clicks of his leg braces and crutches – was a familiar part of every COMA meeting. He was also a linchpin of the Department's nutrition surveillance programmes, together with MAFF; and contributed to the development and implementation of Government nutrition policies, such as the Health of the Nation. Bob said he was most pleased to have carried out a Review of the Welfare Food Scheme, which led to the Healthy Start programme and to have been involved in the Department for Education and Employment's Regulations on Compulsory National Nutrition Standards for School Meals.

Bob qualified in biochemistry in Birmingham in 1967, and immediately progressed to a postgraduate diploma in applied human nutrition at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. He then went on to use his newly developed skills as a manager of food and nutrition surveys in Zambia. It was in Africa that he first met his wife to be, Jane. But it was also here that Bob developed the illness that led to his very visible disability. It is a tribute to his character and

determination that this disability became almost invisible to his friends and colleagues – an idiosyncratic backdrop to working with Bob that was not allowed to impact on the work itself. Indeed, typically, Bob used it as an opportunity to make a broader contribution – he was an advisor to the Civil Service on accessibility, for instance in DH buildings. As much as Bob did not allow his disability to get in the way of his working life, equally it did not stop him engaging in a wide variety of extramural activities – as anyone who had experienced a drive in one of his beloved and specially adapted cars will testify! He remained a keen and active sportsman, in particular swimming, all his adult life, and later developed a passion for big game fishing, travelling widely to do so. Outwardly a man of conventional habits (one cheese, one jam sandwich each day for lunch) he revelled in fulfilling the more surprising and unusual facets of his life.

His more relaxed domestic arrangements were made possible by unswerving support from his wife Jane, whom he had married in Africa shortly before the illness that cost him the use of his legs. He delighted in frequent visits from his wide circle of friends from all over the world made during his lifetime of travel, as well as from his rather extended family, crossing several generations. Born into a Shropshire family, he retained close family links all his life, and regularly returned to visit.

After retiring from the DH in 2001 Bob was nevertheless – of course – not idle, and took up several positions in public service. For the Nutrition Society, where he had already been a council member between 1996 and 1998, he was Honorary Professional Affairs Officer from 2002 to 2006. He was also a director of Lambeth Primary Care NHS Trust from 2002, and was involved in charity work. Though his health eventually began to cause increasing difficulties, his travelling schedule was never curtailed, and it was on one such excursion that his final illness became apparent during 2007. For the first time his physical frame was diminished, but he will always be remembered as a big-framed, powerfully built man, with a sharp sense of humour, who gave much to the world, yet took less back.

Professor Martin Wiseman

email: mjwiseman@ntlworld.com