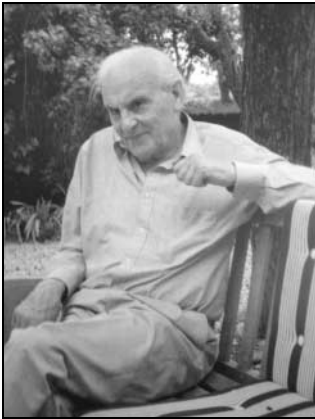


Obituary

Dr John Horder CBE, FRCPsych, FRCP

Formerly general practitioner,
Kentish Town Health Centre, and past President
of the Royal College of General Practitioners



John Horder was born on 9 December 1919 into a well-to-do professional family in the London suburb of Ealing. His grandfather, a Congregational minister, was a source of spiritual inspiration to him all his life, even though he later became an agnostic. His mother was an accomplished violinist and John's original intention was to become a professional musician: he began training

as a pianist in Paris, before going up to Oxford, where he read classics. However, out of a desire to study human nature, he later switched to medicine. His degree was interrupted by the Second World War, when he became an officer in the King's Royal Rifle Corps. His service was cut short by a depressive illness, which he developed in response to the daunting prospect of having to kill people as a soldier.

His original plan was to become a psychiatrist and with this in mind he began a Jungian analysis. After qualifying (1948) and doing a number of hospital medical jobs, in 1951 he did a 2-week locum at the James Wigg Practice (where his wife was already working as a GP). He became so fascinated and inspired by general practice that he stayed there for the next 30 years, eventually becoming a senior partner at what became the Kentish Town Health Centre. He and his wife did research to demonstrate the importance of the contribution of general practice to the healthcare of the population. Here, in this unique setting, John felt he could study human nature and pursue his interest in the psychological aspects of illness.

His recurrent depressions gave him deep insights into his patients' psychological problems. One of them was Sylvia Plath, who he looked after devotedly until her untimely death by suicide. He was one of the original members of Michael Balint's first group for GPs at the Tavistock Clinic, which Balint reported on in the classic *The Doctor, His Patient and The Illness*. However, John disagreed with Balint about the extent to which

psychoanalytic ideas could be applied to medicine. His interest in the psychological aspects of illness led to him being made a Member of the Royal College of Psychiatrists in 1974, and a Fellow in 1980.

John was a softly spoken, unassuming, gentle, yet also a very determined person. He believed that general practice should have an equal status with other medical specialties and he contributed in a major way to the establishment of the College of General Practitioners in 1952 (later the Royal College of General Practitioners), eventually becoming its president in 1979 (1979–1982). He chaired the group that wrote the classic textbook *The Future General Practitioner – Learning and Teaching*, which ran into several editions. With Professor Barbara Starfield and others he carried out research into the importance of continuity of care in general practice. He played an enormous part in developing vocational training in general practice. He was a consultant advisor to the Department of Health and Social Security. He forged links with GPs throughout Europe and set up educational training bodies in several European countries. He was the first GP to be appointed as a consultant to the World Health Organization. He founded the Centre for the Advancement of Inter-professional Education (1987), of which he was first chairman for 10 years and then president. He was made OBE in 1971 and CBE in 1981.

John was a great teacher whose example inspired generations of medical students and GPs. His whole way of being with his patients embodied the psychosomatic approach to medicine. He encouraged students to think about the patient's feelings and to consider their own emotional reactions to being with the patient. His attitude came as a real revelation to me, a medical student briefly attached to his practice, after receiving much teaching with a disease-centred orientation.

Outside medicine John was a talented watercolour painter – his painting of the Royal College of Psychiatrists was reproduced in the *British Medical Journal* – and a talented pianist and organist. A deeply imaginative and creative person, John was loved and admired by his patients and colleagues alike. When he started medicine he wrote that general practice had yet to find its heroes. As Marshall Marinker has said, he was one such hero. He died on 30 May 2012. He is survived by his wife, their two sons and two daughters.

Peter Shoenberg

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