

References

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My memories of Walter Holland: leader in promoting epidemiology collaboration in Europe

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I first met Walter Holland, recently commemorated in the *International Journal of Epidemiology*,¹ in 1965, when he was in the faculty of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and I was a trainee in epidemiology on the other side of Gower Street, in the MRC Statistical Research Unit. I was attending—as was a colleague who became a long-lasting friend, the late Dimitrios Trichopoulos—the “Short and Combined Courses in Medical Statistics and Epidemiology”. After attending Walter’s lectures, I visited his thriving Department of Clinical Epidemiology and Social Medicine at St. Thomas’ Hospital, where research was especially centered on respiratory disease epidemiology and on health services evaluation, with particular attention to screening.

If these activities rapidly made Walter a leader on the UK scene in epidemiology and public health, it is through his increasing engagement in epidemiology at the international, and particularly European, level that our contact developed, in a friendly spirit, over several decades.

I met him again in 1968 when I first attended the triennial international scientific meeting of the International Epidemiological Association (IEA) in Primosten, on the Adriatic coast of (now) Croatia. He was one of the key figures in epidemiology and in the life of the IEA, on which he wanted to impress a genuinely international breadth. To this end, he had also been soliciting the recognition of the IEA as an organization with an official relationship to the World Health Organization. A key step in the development of the IEA was the successful launch in 1972 of the *Inter-*

national Journal of Epidemiology, of which Walter was the founding Editor until 1977.

Walter was at ease with foreign languages, particularly German and French, and among all British epidemiologists he was the most ready to ‘cross the Channel’ to foster epidemiological research and teaching in continental Europe. It was here that we collaborated on a number of initiatives. Notable was the adventure of the Panel of Epidemiology and Social Medicine in the European Community, which he managed to establish at a time when medical research in general, and epidemiology in particular, had no officially recognized status and only a de facto, marginal standing within European Community institutions. With him as President, I became Secretary of the Panel (after Ted Bennett). For funds, we relied on modest ‘pocket money’ which Walter had been able to obtain as a discretionary allocation from Dr. Recht, the head of Directorate V (Social Affairs) of the European Community.

The Panel acted as a catalyst in the development of epidemiology—an objective fully attained, as witnessed by three initiatives. First, the opportunity to be part of a circle of dynamic European epidemiologists prompted the creation, in several countries, of scientific societies in epidemiology (Italy is a case in point) or the activation of the epidemiological research sections of existing societies of public health.

Second, the Panel promoted educational activities; one of which, the European Educational Programme in Epidemiology (EEPE), has outlived all expectations, having

now reached the age of thirty-one. Before launching it as a three-week summer course, the first based in Europe—with an essentially European faculty—Walter and I discussed substantive issues at a dinner in the Athenaeum Club in London. The name of the course proved problematic; to call the course a ‘Summer School’ seemed too ambitious. After exploring several options, we decided on ‘Educational Programme’ (in UK English spelling); that label gradually became well known and has remained. In June 1988, Walter gave the inaugural lecture in Florence.

The third catalysis brought about by the Panel has probably been the most important. By being an informal, but well identified, circle of (mostly) young epidemiologists actively engaged in upfront research, the Panel prepared the ground for epidemiology to be acknowledged among the recognized fields of research once biomedical research, in general, became an official area of competence warranting financial support within the European Community (later European Union). It paved the way for multinational epidemiological projects, often involving the Panel’s epidemiologists—a flourishing approach to investigating health issues throughout Europe.

In the meantime, Walter had become President of the IEA (1987–1990), and I owe to him the suggestion that I present myself as candidate for President-elect in 1993, taking office as President for the period 1996–1999.

Walter’s success in the international promotion of epidemiology as the basic component of public health was crowned by the publication in 1985 of the first edition of the massive *Oxford Textbook of Public Health*, of which he was the originator and principal editor. The book has reached its sixth edition and is a ‘must’ reference for all professionals in epidemiology and public health. Walter

had invited me to be a chapter author (for cancer), as he did again when, years later, he planned, with Jørn Olsen and Charles du V. Florey, the book *The Development of Modern Epidemiology*. I remember the preliminary discussions in which I expressed some concerns about the risk of our being amateurs in a field like history—even more treacherous than observational epidemiology. Walter was well aware of the problem and, in the subtitle of the book (published in 2007), *Personal Reports from Those Who Were There*, he clearly indicated the limits of our endeavour. The book, which includes chapters on the different paths of evolution of epidemiology in a number of European countries, is an extensive and valuable source of documentation for historians of our discipline.

After his retirement from St. Thomas’, I had the pleasure of visiting Walter at his small office at the London School of Economics, an institution whose role in the social sciences and liberal culture in general goes well beyond what is usually subsumed by the label ‘Economics’. The School’s tradition and philosophy fitted Walter’s view of epidemiology-and-public health: lucid, critically alert, politically non-partisan, but firm in the dual principle that health politics and policies should be based on sound science and on the primary goal of health for all. From this perspective, Walter’s contributions to the development of epidemiology internationally, notably in Europe, and to the activity of the IEA, stand as a major and exemplary legacy.

Reference

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