



## OBITUARIES

# Peter Fisher: homeopathic physician to the Queen

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London



Peter Fisher was probably the nearest anyone will ever get to being homeopathic royalty: homeopathic physician to the Queen, president of the Faculty of Homeopathy, and chair of the World Health Organization's working group on homeopathy. But what made him remarkable was his single minded determination to promote homeopathy despite the unrelenting flood of criticism and scientific evidence against it. His career was a masterclass for politicians on how to stay on message. Vowing that he would "debate anyone, anytime," he was an accomplished writer and speaker.

### Perfect timing

Fisher could not have chosen a better time to start specialising in homeopathy. He graduated from Cambridge in 1976 during the evolution of the new "pick n' mix" medical culture and amid a growing realisation that care professionals could never provide the personal engagement many patients wanted. The thalidomide scandal had shaken public faith in modern medicines, and homeopathy and other forms of complementary medicine were coming in from the cold—with a helping hand from Prince Charles and an unquestioning media that gave more prominence to royal patronage than to evidence based medicine.

But Fisher's conversion to unorthodox medicine and homeopathy was far removed from the turmoil in the NHS. A self confessed communist revolutionary during his student days, he was one of the first Westerners to go to China after US President Richard Nixon's historic visit in 1972, which had ended 25 years of no communication or diplomatic ties between the two countries.

In what was a life changing trip, Fisher saw a woman on an operating table in a provincial hospital, her entire abdomen open, having half her stomach resected. Her anaesthesia consisted of three needles in her left ear. This was, he thought, not something that he "had been taught in Cambridge." For a while he considered studying traditional Chinese medicine.

He first used homeopathy himself after developing an unspecified complaint. After "various distinguished physicians" claimed that nothing could be done for him a US friend recommended "the magic of the minimum dose." Speaking in 2012 to the *World of Homeopathy* website, he recalled: "The first thing [after taking the remedy], I had a terrible aggravation. It made me realise at least it did something. And then it helped, and that sort of started the ball rolling."<sup>1</sup>

### Life and career

The son of Antony and Eve Fisher, Peter was educated at Tonbridge School and at Emmanuel College, Cambridge. After completing his training at Westminster Hospital, London, he became a research fellow in the department of rheumatology and clinical pharmacology at Barts and was the lead researcher in one of the first homeopathy studies to be published in a leading medical journal.<sup>2</sup>

Formerly an honorary consultant rheumatologist at King's College Hospital, he was at the time of his death director of research at the Royal London Hospital for Integrated Medicine (formerly the Royal London Homeopathic Hospital), Europe's largest centre for integrative medicine. For over 25 years he was also editor in chief of *Homeopathy*, the only Medline indexed homeopathic journal (a status he was extremely proud of). His elevation as a fellow of the Royal College of Physicians enraged many fellow doctors.

He became homeopathic physician to the Queen in 2001 and claimed to have treated her entire family. Prince Charles was a particular ally who, Fisher noted, was "very friendly and not afraid to stick his neck out."

## Challenges

But his role as a champion of homeopathy had become increasingly challenging. In 1993 Edzard Ernst gave up a prestigious chair in Vienna to become the world's first professor of complementary medicine at the University of Exeter. Complementary medicine specialists initially saw Ernst's appointment as a golden public relations opportunity, but Ernst quickly built an international reputation for successfully applying science to test the value of alternative therapies. He was regularly interviewed on television and radio and became an invaluable contact for many journalists.

Media coverage of homeopathy and complementary medicine became increasingly critical and questioning. Ernst was also committed, it seemed, to "debating anyone, anytime."

In a Head to Head debate with Ernst in *The BMJ*, Fisher urged doctors to put aside any bias based on the alleged implausibility of homeopathy, arguing that, when integrated with standard

care, it was safe and popular with patients and that it improved clinical outcomes without increasing costs.<sup>3</sup>

But Ernst argued that the £3m-£5m (€3.3m-€5.6m; \$3.9m-\$6.5m) that the NHS spent on homeopathy would be better used elsewhere and that, although patient choice was important, it should be evidence based. He did not accept the premise that homeopathy was safe, arguing that even a placebo could cause harm if it replaced an effective treatment.

In June this year Fisher must have been bitterly disheartened when a High Court judge upheld NHS England's decision to stop funding homeopathic remedies, but this did not dampen his ambition or campaigning zeal. He had turned a speculative eye on polypharmacy in elderly patients, arguing that little attention had been given to alternatives.

He married Nina Oxenham in 1999. They were divorced in 2017. He leaves their two daughters, Lily and Evie, who are at university. Known for his wit, he loved music, art, and philosophy and was a keen gardener.

## Biography

Peter Antony Goodwin Fisher (b 1950; q Cambridge 1976; FFHom, FRCP), died in a cycling accident in Holborn, London, on 15 August 2018

- 1 World of Homeopathy. An interview with Peter Fisher. 4 July 2012. <https://worldofhomeopathy.wordpress.com/2012/07/04/an-interview-with-peter-fisher/>.
- 2 Fisher P, Greenwood A, Huskisson EC, Turner P, Belon P. Effect of homeopathic treatment on fibrositis (primary fibromyalgia). *BMJ* 1989;299:365-6. 10.1136/bmj.299.6695.365 2506969
- 3 Fisher P, Ernst E. Should doctors recommend homeopathy? *BMJ* 2015;351:h3735. 10.1136/bmj.h3735 26173948

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