

OBITUARY

# Dr Peter Fisher obituary

## Former 'revolutionary' who championed homeopathy and treated the Queen

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Peter Fisher in 1995. His endorsement of “mumbo jumbo” enraged many of his peers  
ALAN WELLER/THE TIMES

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Dr Peter Fisher’s best advert for being a world-famous homeopath was that, as the Queen’s physician for 17 years, he did not (to the best of the public’s knowledge) treat her for anything more than being “under the weather”.

Yet there were plenty in the medical profession who publicly

dismissed his advocacy of homeopathy as “mumbo jumbo”. Fisher’s gravitas and credibility as a fellow of the Royal College of Physicians seemed to enrage them all the more.

The German physician Samuel Hahnemann had first proposed use of the treatment in 1796 on the principle that a substance causing disease could be watered down many times to become a treatment. The water is thought to store information on the properties of the disease and then transmit it to the body, which heals itself.

If it seemed fanciful, Fisher admitted that it was a hard sell. “I do understand where the sceptics are coming from. There does appear to be a good reason why it can’t possibly work, and yet it does. It’s like holding a mirror up to nature. The idea is that the body has very strong self-healing capabilities.”

As much as 16 per cent of the UK population used homeopathic remedies in 1994, but several NHS Trusts have stopped funding the treatment and prescriptions are reported to have fallen by 94 per cent in the past 20 years.

Some practitioners have been labelled unethical for discouraging conventional medicine. “The homeopathic community is in many ways its own worst enemy; we have people who make silly claims, frankly who are not qualified and say things they really shouldn’t say, for instance about preventing malaria,” Fisher said.

A man of sharp wit, which entertained the Queen , he described himself as an “integrated medical doctor”. Homeopathy was complementary to conventional treatments and was often a better holistic alternative where some traditional medication could prove ineffective, he said.

He relished defending the treatment against “huge prejudice and persecution”, saying that he would “debate anyone, anytime”. In response to claims by Professor Richard Dawkins that there was no clinical evidence to justify homeopathy, Fisher responded robustly on the *Times* letters page pointing to a study in the *Lancet* in 1997 in which more than 200 clinical trials showed that benefits went beyond the the placebo effect. “Many well-known sceptics avoid me because they lose the debate,” Fisher said. “What they prefer to do is blog or tweet so they can make nasty sneering public remarks and you can’t come back at them.”

Peter Antony Goodwin Fisher was born in 1950, the son of Antony Fisher and his wife, Eve. He was educated at Tonbridge School and studied medicine at Emmanuel College, Cambridge.

In the months after President Nixon’s visit to China in 1972, which signalled a thaw in relations with the West, Fisher took one of the first opportunities to visit the country.

A self-confessed “communist revolutionary” while a medical student at Cambridge in the early 1970s, Fisher’s pilgrimage to

China changed his life. At one provincial hospital he watched in astonishment as a fully conscious woman had surgery on her abdomen. There was no anaesthetic, just three acupuncture needles in her ear.

He never did succeed in getting the red flag hoisted over the Houses of Parliament, but he did embrace alternative medicine. “The scales fell from my eyes,” he recalled. “She was completely conscious throughout. I went to an elite medical school, and I just thought, ‘That can’t happen.’ ”

On returning to Cambridge, where he would complete postgraduate studies, he was determined to learn about Chinese medicine. Then he suffered an unspecified medical complaint and was told by a consultant that “nothing could be done” to alleviate the symptoms. In desperation he tried homoeopathy. At first he suffered a “terrible aggravation, then it helped”. His recovery persuaded him to switch to homeopathy.

He finished his training at Westminster Hospital Medical School and was then invited to pursue his passion for homeopathy in a research fellowship at Barts hospital department of rheumatology and clinical pharmacology. Here, he conducted one of the first studies of homeopathy to be published in the *British Medical Journal*, in 1989.

Fisher had qualified as a consultant physician in 1986. He became a director of the Royal Free Hospital of

Homeopathy(now the Royal Free Hospital of Integrated Medicine) in 1996 and was made clinical director in 1998.

He married Nina Oxenham in 1997. They were divorced last year. He is survived by their two daughters, Lily and Evie, who are at university.

The Queen put her faith in Fisher in 2001 when she appointed him as the royal physician, although it is not known whether she took his advice not to take established treatments for colds and flu. “Most of the conventional treatments push the symptoms down and actually prolong the illness,” he said. He described his appointment as “a rather opaque process. Someone comes up to you and says, ‘If you were asked, you wouldn’t say no would you?’ They can’t risk you possibly saying no. So they check you out, and then you don’t hear a thing. Then a year later you get a letter.” He did not charge for treating the Queen.

Homeopathic treatment of the royal family started when Queen Victoria saw Dr Frederic Quin at the recently founded London Homeopathic Hospital in the 1850s. There has been an official homeopathic physician treating the royal family since the 1930s, when the future King George VI was given the homeopathic remedy *Ambra grisea*. It did not cure his stutter as hoped, but he conferred the prefix “Royal” to the hospital in 1948.

With Prince Charles a noted enthusiast, Fisher had a

sympathetic audience. “I treat the entire family,” he said in an interview in 2011.

Having accepted the royal appointment, he became embroiled in increasing controversy over the future of the London Hospital of Homeopathy after it became part of the University College London Hospitals Group and in 2007 he faced a fierce campaign to close the hospital. He persuaded an MP to forward an early-day motion that attracted more than 200 signatures, triggering a debate in the Commons. It had to wait until the end of stormy exchanges over the collapse of Northern Rock, but the hospital was saved.

Fisher was appointed fellow of the Faculty of Homoeopathy that regulates the profession and at the time of his death was president of the faculty.

Colleagues said his homeopathic self-medication must have had something going for it because he was an energetic man, whose diary was full of engagements across the world. Among them was his role as chairman of the World Health Organisation working group on homeopathy.

A lover of classical music, art and philosophy, Fisher relaxed by gardening and was also a keen cyclist. He died after a collision with a lorry in central London on national cycle to work day.

Despite being in his late sixties, he still felt that he had much

to do. He was particularly eager to reform the practice known as “polypharmacy”, the prescription of different drugs for multiple illnesses in the elderly. He claimed that the practice was little more than racketeering by the drug companies.

“It’s a pandemic. The numbers are terrifying and it’s doing more harm than good,” he said. “Very little attention is given to alternatives.”

In the heat of battle he would write vitriolic emails to homeopathy’s latest critic, replete with colourful language and abusive phrases, and show it to his colleagues. When they told him he could not possibly send an email like that, he would smile: “Don’t worry, I just needed to let off steam.”

**Dr Peter Fisher was born on September 2, 1950. He died in a cycling accident on August 15, 2018, aged 67**

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