

## My life as an editor - Richard Horton

Richard, you studied medicine at the University of Birmingham, qualifying in 1986, before moving into research at the Liver Unit of the Royal Free Hospital in London, UK. Why did you leave medical research in 1990 to become an Assistant Editor at *The Lancet*?

I love medicine. I always wanted to do medicine. And I loved the work with patients. It was such a privilege to be able to meet somebody and they would tell you things about their lives which they probably weren't even telling members of their family. It's almost a sacred role in society, being a doctor, and it's a very inspiring profession to be part of. But I was always interested in writing and politics, and being a doctor in Birmingham and then going to do research at the Royal Free, well, it

was not my perfect dream job. In fact, the Royal Free was a disaster. Nobody went to work before 11 o'clock in the morning. They all went to the pub at midday, rolled back drunk at 3 o'clock in the afternoon, and left at half past four. And I did think to myself, is this the rest of my life?

I was in a pub with some friends, and I had a copy of *The Lancet*, and there was a job advert for an editor. I'd had few drinks, and thought, God, I'll—you know—*The Lancet*, it's got medicine, it's a bit political, it's about writing, what the hell, what have I got to lose? I'm at rock bottom here. And so in the pub I went to the payphone—they didn't have cell phones then—and I called up *The Lancet*, and I got through to the person who I found out was the then-Deputy Editor, David Sharpe. This is a pub, you know, people were shouting *two pints of lager and a packet of crisps please!* Thankfully we didn't have human resource departments in those days. After coming down for a so-called interview—we just talked for an hour, about nothing, really; we hardly mentioned medicine, and we certainly didn't talk about *The Lancet*—I got a little note, saying, why don't you come and work with us? That was in 1990, and I've been here ever since. It's a wonderful family. It's now totally in my DNA. I love it.

You moved to New York as North American Editor in 1993, before becoming Editor in 1995. Tell me about those years.

Well, it was an escape. I loved *The Lancet*, but personalities sometimes clash, and the Editor at the time was a man who I deeply admired, Robin Fox, but he and I had a few rough edges. He clearly was frustrated with me, and I was probably not the easiest person to work with, so we both agreed that it would be good if I wasn't in the office. The only thing not being in the office, short of being fired, was going to open an office in North America, so we decided we would open a little office in New York. That was also perfect, because again, human resources was rather absent.



It was like a two year sabbatical, because it was just a chance for me to read and think about medicine, and science, and *The Lancet*: what the journal should be doing, and what its opportunities were. You don't often get a chance to do that in your job, your day job just doesn't give you the space. I always planned to stay in America, and never come back, until Robin left *The Lancet*, and they needed a new editor. I was 33 at the time, and they didn't employ editors much before the age of 55, so I didn't think I had a hope in hell, but it seemed like a thing to have a go for. If you don't try, you never get anything, so I applied.

*The Lancet* was founded in 1823 by Thomas Wakley, and the journal's 10,000<sup>th</sup> issue will be published this year.

Is that legacy ever a burden?

The reason why I love this place so much is the history. The early 19th century when *The Lancet* was founded was deeply troubled, and Thomas Wakley identified the troubles and the predicaments in medicine at the time. *The Lancet* was very much born of those times, when medicine was intensely reformist and political. Wakley was arrested on several occasions, went to prison, was in court a lot, and of course became a Member of Parliament. He wasn't always right in what he said and did, as we look back, but he was completely engaged in the politics of the times. So that legacy is really important to me, because it's what distinguishes us from the *New England Journal of Medicine*, *The BMJ*, even *Nature* and *Science*—it makes *The Lancet* a very different kind of journal. It makes it therefore—to some people—very uncomfortable. *The Lancet* was a very uncomfortable journal in 1823, and it should be similarly uncomfortable now. That legacy is an inspiration. It's what gives me life energy.

How has the journal come to be this great friend of global health?

The bad side of *The Lancet's* global interest is that it was a global journal, and in the 19th century was very much a vehicle for colonial medicine, as we merrily went our way destroying communities and societies in the British Empire. But in more recent times, although we still had an interest in international health, as it was then called, it wasn't really a mainstream theme of the journal, and I had no background in overseas medicine. But I met this amazing man called Eldryd Parry, who took me to a remote rural community in south west of Ethiopia, and opened my eyes to a world that I'd never seen before. I'd thought *The Lancet* was an epidemiology journal, but when I went to Ethiopia with Eldryd, I realised that was completely wrong. Epidemiology was a means to an end, and what Eldryd was

doing was showing me what the end was. I'm not religious, but it was close to a religious epiphany. It was a complete turning point, but I didn't know what to do next. Did you just publish lots of editorials, lots of news items? It took a researcher called Jennifer Bryce to show me how to use science as a force for social and political change. You bring the best scientists and the best evidence together around a neglected issue, which provides the platform for advocacy and activism. If you take Enlightenment values, and then the Romantic imagination of the early 19th century, and you put both of those into a 21st century medical journal, using science as the platform for those values and for activism, it seems to me you can create something which could be very powerful. And that's really what we're trying to do now. It's what we have been doing, and will continue to do until they throw me out.



**When Thomas Wakley founded *The Lancet* in 1823, he announced "A lancet can be an arched window to let in the light or it can be a sharp surgical instrument to cut out the dross and I intend to use it in both senses".**

*How do you balance travelling for international meetings and being a global health advocate with putting out 51 issues of a print and online medical journal every single year?*

Because you have an amazing team! The trick is to create an organisation that doesn't depend on you. And the great thing about this organisation is I could walk out the door now, and never come back, and *The Lancet* would continue quite happily without me.

*The journal is very high profile, which means that successes get noticed, but so do mistakes and controversies. What should the role of a modern, political medical journal be?*

A medical journal should stand up for people living in distress, anywhere in the world. That distress can come from

chronic conditions, chronic poverty, chronic political instability, and it can come from acute crises, whether they're humanitarian crises, natural disasters, or wars. And so the journal needs to be a forum where the distress of any human being can be expressed and drawn attention to, even when that is painful and controversial. Science is a common international language. Medicine is a common international language. And medicine and science together can build bridges between communities that politics can't.

*This year marks your 20th anniversary as Editor. What's been your proudest achievement?*

That's a difficult question. When I joined *The Lancet*, it was a tiny, very fragile organisation. It had a very small number of editors, and financially was not very secure. Over the last 20 years we have built it up—I think we've got the best team of scientific editors of any medical

publication in the world. We have got an amazing group of people here, and now we are safe, sustainable, robust, and thriving, in a way we weren't 20 years ago. The second achievement would be our commitment to global health. I feel we have lived up to Thomas Wakley's inspiration, and have taken his idea and managed to reinterpret it for a different century. I think he would feel satisfied that we had honoured his legacy.

*Who is Richard Horton outside *The Lancet*?*

It is a problem that sometimes *The Lancet* takes over your life! I like quietness, and time to read, and just think, and look at the world. Who's the real Richard Horton? It's somebody who's just watching the world and being inspired by it.

**Hannah Cagney**

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