
Obituary



Felix Letemendia, formerly Professor of Psychiatry, Queen's University, Ontario, Canada

Felix Letemendia, who was a consultant psychiatrist at Oxford 1959–75, and then Professor of Psychiatry at Queen's University, Ontario, 1975–91 died suddenly in a London (England) street on 9

October 1995. Born a Basque in San Sebastian (Spain) in 1923, he learned his medicine at home with the help of local apprenticeships, and on qualification became a resident at Madrid University Hospital, eventually becoming first assistant to Professor Lopez Ibor. Already he showed kindness to anyone he perceived as willing to learn and always had time to support and guide them. People such as Luis Martin Santos and Castilla del Pino, now well-known in Spanish psychiatry, were among those he drew in. Meanwhile he taught himself perfect English at home with the help of the BBC foreign service.

He came to England in 1950 age 27 as a British Council Scholar at the National Hospital, Queen Square, and stayed on: first as a senior house officer at Napsbury, then for four years at the Maudsley. There followed a three year research fellowship at Birmingham in the University department of Experimental Psychiatry with Willi Mayer-Gross and Joel Elkes, which allowed him to requalify MRCS, LRCP. He then became a consultant at Littlemore and the Ashurst Clinic, Oxford.

In Oxford he quickly became a leading figure, much in demand for domiciliary visits, and playing a full part in running the hospital. He opened a new psychiatric centre in Banbury (the Elms, Horton), and sponsored a variety of studies of clinical practice in alcoholism, drug dependence, social inadequacy in out-patients and the uses of social skills therapy, in addition to a long-running series of investigations on chronic schizophrenic patients, their assessment and drug treatment. But his most individual contribution was in teaching and career guidance. Many juniors learned how to conduct a thorough clinical interview and keep the essential record of it with precision. Many were encouraged and helped to start their own researches. A flow of

doctors from Spain and Spanish America came to him, in addition to the British. Some returned to Spain, others, including those politically unacceptable at home, were helped to careers elsewhere. He became a clinical lecturer in the Oxford medical school, and an adviser to the Spanish Embassy in London. Beyond his clinical and administrative work in Oxford he was for a time Secretary or Council member of the Section of Psychiatry of the Royal Society of Medicine, and an elected member of the Executive and Finance Committee of the College, as well as a leader in accreditation exercises in the Midlands.

The move in 1975 to a chair at Queen's, and the directorship of Training and Research at Kingston Psychiatric Hospital, gave him time, money, and some experienced collaborators, and enabled his research to flower. As a committee member of the Ontario Mental Health Foundation his influence spread in Canada. His own work was always closely clinical, not concerned with general theories or biochemical pathology, or psychodynamics, but sought to improve diagnosis and assessments or better physical treatments.

During the '50s and '60s much of this was on the psychopharmacology and rehabilitation of chronic schizophrenic patients. His approach was both creative and practical. He took advantage of the existence of an isolated large house full of long-stay male patients to examine what each knew and felt about the others, and the social interactions in the group. He photographed each one in a standard way, and at individual interviews showed the pictures in turn, inviting the patient's comments on what he saw, with surprising findings. In Oxford he took advantage of the existence of a large neurological clinic for multiple sclerosis to promote study of the affective and dementing aspects of the developing disease, hitherto disregarded. Later, in Canada, diabetes mellitus was the subject of psychological and neurological research. Also in Canada, he showed by clinical trial and literature review the circumstances under which lithium salts could be effective treatment in schizophrenia. A series of studies on the relief of depression by sleep deprivation began to define its mechanism, and gave a practical clinical test to distinguish dementia from depression in the elderly. (He had much earlier shown the value of the EEG in early diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease.) He provoked enquiry into polydipsia and water intoxication, found not to be so rare in Kingston in-patients, which demonstrated that afternoon weighing could be used to predict

intoxication and modify polydipsia. In the last ten years he led a detailed deep study of the effective use of electroconvulsive therapy, which broke new ground and is still in course of publication – like most of his work, appearing in *Psychological Medicine* or the *British Journal of Psychiatry*.

Because he was in no way a publicist or self-advertiser he did not push his very real contributions to medical psychiatry, and there is some danger of their being overlooked or forgotten instead of being pursued and absorbed into standard teaching. This was one aspect of his personality: very unassuming, quiet and reserved, a very private man who never felt the need to speak of his achievements. This was balanced by another aspect, his charisma. He soon impressed everyone he met with his deep knowledge lightly borne, his calm balanced judgement, his integrity, his disinterested willingness to help, and the value of his advice. This obviously helped his psychotherapeutic power,

but also meant that a few words in a committee or informal comment in a private conversation could be very influential with colleagues.

In his private life he enjoyed his family and home, providing a stable, happy and stimulating childhood for his four daughters and encouraging his wife Emmie in academic studies in Spanish literature. He had many talents and interests. He enjoyed music, architecture, art galleries, museums, cinema and theatre. He read widely in several languages – literature, philosophy, and German psychiatry – and continued to extend his knowledge. He taught himself to play the viola da gamba and the clarinet, and was a keen painter and photographer. Although essentially a city man he went caravanning. Always he was ready to enjoy conversation, an engaging companion with a sense of fun and intellectual curiosity.

J. L. CRAMMER