



columns

obituary

John Gwilym Howells

Formerly Director of Family Psychiatry, Ipswich Hospital, Suffolk, and who played an important part in the foundation of the RCPsych

John Gwilym was born in 1918 and was brought up in Holyhead, Anglesey, within the characteristic culture of North Wales, which in his boyhood was still relatively unaffected by modernisation. His father introduced him to country sports, but his mother diverted him towards more intellectual interests; however, she died when Gwilym was 15, which affected him deeply. At his grammar school, where he was captain of cricket, he received a good grounding in science subjects but was uncertain about his future direction.

In his interview with me in 1990, Gwilym said that he saw university as the gateway to knowledge, but also as the gateway to London. Though appreciative of chapel services and eisteddfods, around which local life revolved, his sights were set on a wider world. His own GP had trained at Charing Cross Hospital, and that was where he went himself in the late 1930s. He had been much impressed by hearing Lloyd George speak on two occasions and at one time even considered the possibility of going into politics. Indeed, a politician's approach might be traced in some of his later activities and he was always a fluent public speaker.

His pre-clinical instruction was at King's College, together with students from three other medical schools. A feature of King's was that it was possible to study at the same time for a theological qualification – the AKC – but this was followed by doubts, which caused Gwilym to describe himself as a 'humanistic agnostic'. Another religious connection was that he lived in a Toc H hostel among a diverse group who were expected to contribute some service to the community. As a student, he also took the opportunity to attend courses on psychopathology and developmental psychology; the first of these was given by J. A. Hadfield, one of the founders of the Tavistock Clinic, who was influential in directing him towards psychiatry.

The beginning of his clinical studies coincided with the outbreak of war and Charing Cross was evacuated to Ashridge Park in Hertfordshire. However, students spent periodic spells in London, where they were heavily involved with casualties



from the Blitz; as a houseman, he worked first for Sir Gordon Holmes, giving him an apprenticeship in neurology, and then for a neurosurgeon. In the psychiatric outpatients department, Gwilym clerked for Clifford Allen, a pioneer in the management of psychosexual disorders.

At 24, Gwilym joined the RAMC and became battalion medical officer to the Northamptonshire Regiment in Northwest Europe; after the end of hostilities, he was in charge of a Medical Reception Station overlooking the Rhine. There, he was also able to attend a course at the University Hospital in Göttingen. On demobilisation, he decided to opt for psychiatry and was accepted for training at the Maudsley Hospital, where his contemporaries included D. L. Davies, Trevor Gibbens, Desmond Pond, Michael Shepherd, David Stafford-Clark and Anthony Storr. Like others, he found his relationship with Sir Aubrey Lewis a difficult one, though some years later, the Professor suggested that Gwilym might apply for a consultant post in the children's department.

At the age of 30, he looked for a consultant post and was attracted by one in Ipswich, which was unusual, as it was at a general hospital. There, he sought to emphasise exploration of a patient's family situation much more strongly than he had found in his Maudsley training. As a result, he received financial support from the Regional Hospital Board to develop an Institute of Family Psychiatry which had clinical, research and teaching functions. It developed a Family Relations Indicator to assist diagnosis, techniques of family group therapy, and environmental manipulation in the form of 'vector therapy'. Gwilym's *Family Psychiatry*, published in 1963, was the first of 48 authored or edited books, with translations into six languages. Courses were given for different professional groups and that for

GP's ran for more than 30 years. He was careful to dissociate himself from the fashionable blaming of the family for causing schizophrenia, which was then influential in America. The Institute was later given an association with Cambridge University, but it did not outlast his retirement. In 1965–1974, he was a member of the East Anglian Regional Hospital Board.

In the 1960s, Gwilym became a prominent member of the Society of Clinical Psychiatrists – nicknamed the 'Oedipal Group' – which sought to modernise the profession. He discovered from a colleague that since it had a Royal Charter, the Royal Medico-Psychological Association (RMPA) could become a Royal College by obtaining a supplemental charter from the Privy Council. This, however, stirred up a hornet's nest of bitter opposition from the Royal College of Physicians and from leading members of the RMPA. Howells was a leading figure in the Petitions Committee of the RMPA, which struggled to keep the aim of a College alive, helped by votes of members at the annual general meetings and in a postal ballot. The fight was eventually won within the RMPA, but the Physicians continued to block progress by their influence on the Privy Council, until Lord (Robert) Platt became President there. Thus, what should have been an administrative change took 6 years, but throughout this time, Gwilym was tireless in his efforts to give psychiatry a truly independent voice. He received the Distinguished Fellowship of the American Psychiatric Association.

For my *Bulletin* interview, I was privileged to stay at his superb house, with its views over the Constable country of Dedham Vale. It contained his astonishing collection of opera videos, while outside was the magnificent garden he had created. This was the setting for his second career as a horticulturist, in which he became the leading expert on clematis. Here again, he wrote several books, was Chairman of the British Clematis Society and editor of its journal. His own garden contained the largest collection of these plants in the world, in spite of poor soil and a cold wind; this achievement was recognised by his Fellowship of the Linnean Society.

John Gwilym Howells died in November 2007, and is survived by his wife of 63 years, by four children – one of whom is a consultant psychiatrist – and eight grandchildren.

Hugh Freeman

doi: 10.1192/pb.bp.108.021626