

Obituary Professor Sir Michael Rutter

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Michael Rutter, a giant in the field of autism research, child psychiatry, and child mental health, died at his home in London on October 23, 2021 at 88 years of age. Educated at the University of Birmingham and London, Mike was affiliated with the Maudsley Hospital and the Institute of Psychiatry throughout his professional career. In the middle of a career that spanned almost 60 years, Michael Rutter received one of many honors over his lifetime in 1985. This was an Honorary Doctorate from the University of Leiden, following in the footsteps of other luminaries like Albert Bandura, Carl Rogers and Nelson Mandela. However, what pleased Mike most about the award was that, when he was introduced, the master of ceremonies commented that since Mike was born in Beirut, had a Welsh middle name, was a teenager in the U.S., and loved the Lake District, he must be Dutch!

One of the gifts that Michael Rutter gave child psychiatry and psychology was the beginnings of an international perspective. His time as a child in the U.S. and his year-long stays at Albert Einstein in New York and Palo Alto at the Stanford Center made him much more comfortable around American academics than were many of his British peers. He also prided himself on having colleagues and visiting South Africa and Latin America and Asia, as well many European countries. Today, especially with so many of our interactions with colleagues being remote at the same time that we feel far away from each other, we can follow in Mike's footsteps and commitment to international collaborations to feel closer together.

By now, many articles have been written celebrating the contributions Professor Sir Michael Rutter made to our fields. Highlighted often are the following: his role in the first approach to the genetics of autism through the twin study with Susan Folstein; the Isle of Wight and raising the question of how differences in brain function are linked to mental health; *15,000 Hours* and his recognition of the importance of school, teachers and administrators in teens' behavior and academic achievement; and his part in the studies of Romanian orphans and his contribution to beginning to disentangle the consequences of neglect, malnutrition, and lack of attachment. These are all extraordinary and diverse accomplishments by one person. The findings, however, are simply examples of Mike's commitment to bringing multiple fields of knowledge and scientific approaches into child psychiatry. These included epidemiology (as in the Isle of Wight and in the initial twin study); the role of psychological development (also beginning in Isle of Wight as well as his early interest, along with Pat Howlin in language development in autism); the contribution of brain to behavior (also beginning in the Isle of Wight but including the relationship of seizures to autism and malnutrition in the Romanian orphans); and the importance of schools, community and finding the right partner in outcomes.

What did Mike Rutter bring to autism? He was one of the first psychiatrists, along with Isaac Kolvin and Donald Cohen, to speak out against the idea that autism arose from parents' behavior. He was also an adamant voice in the arguments against the MMR vaccine as a cause of autism when others were less willing to speak out. He put together, with Susan Folstein, one of the first large consortia to study genetics and family history in autism; though today, we are far beyond the predicted 3–21 genes accounting for “pure autism” (and far beyond the idea of “pure” autism) that were originally expected. He also believed that research on behavior could be done with high standards, including the development of reliable measures, and that the process of diagnosis had implications beyond the sum of its parts when different sources of information were combined. He was very interested in how we get people to tell us about

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their experiences and how they were feeling. He was a strong believer in investigator-based semi-structured interviews and family histories, which are the closest approaches of all our methods to psychiatric consults as they now stand.

As Mike said at another award ceremony, almost all of his work was with colleagues, often from other disciplines, including psychology, sociology, biostatistics, social work, and nursing, as reflected in his book with his wife, Marjorie. As any of his colleagues know, he was a demanding collaborator, and his long memos were famous in the Institute of Psychiatry. But he also respected different approaches and worked hard to recruit faculty to the Institute of Psychiatry and to the field of autism who were bright and productive and not acolytes, to provide new skills and new perspectives, and to carry on the traditions of an outstanding clinical research group.

For two decades, Mike served as European editor of the Journal while working with Eric Schopler, both of whom succeeded the first editor Leo Kanner. Mike's early work in the 1970's on diagnosis and classification, genetics, and treatment of autism was groundbreaking, setting the stage for the explosion of research that followed the official recognition of autism as a diagnostic category in 1980. Even after he had stepped down as European editor, Mike remained very committed to the work of this Journal, serving as a consultant to the current and former editors, and continuing to review papers until shortly before his passing.

Mike was very proud of his wife, Marjorie, his children, Sheila, Stephen and Christine and his seven grandchildren. He was very respectful of his parents, who lived into their 90's, his older brothers, and his sister, Priscilla, who is still living. He loved live theater, mountains and hiking, good food and wine. Mike leaves many legacies of research approaches and perspectives on children and adolescents. These legacies move the field beyond simple models of internal processes that drive mental health, and instead consider the intersection of brain function, genetic risk, family environment, schools, community, and individual differences. He will be missed, though his legacies will not be forgotten (Fig. 1).

Declarations

Conflict of interest Neither author has any relevant conflict of interest to disclose.



Fig. 1 Michael Rutter receiving Honorary Degree Yale University 2010 note photo by Michael Marsland Yale University

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