

John Balding 1935-2015

John was Director of the Schools Health Education Unit from 1977-2005, and died in January 2015. This appreciation was written by SHEU staff.



Before SHEU

John did his National Service in the RAF, becoming a radio technician. He was repeatedly identified as officer material but just as frequently declined the opportunity. He was once assigned the task of planting Spring bulbs either side of the barracks' main drive, but mysteriously they came up in the shape of the word HATE.

John then read Natural Sciences at Selwyn College, Cambridge, where he was awarded a 'blue' for football. He became a Science teacher in a secondary school, where his second-stream Chemistry class became more successful than the top stream.

John was for a while a dedicated mycologist, and produced a dissertation on the decay of the leaves of *Typha latifolia* (the Greater Reedmace, which you might call a bulrush), by freshwater fungi with tetrahedrally-spined spores.

Partly on the strength of that research work, he was given the post of Biology Lecturer at St.Luke's College, later the Department of Education of the University of Exeter, teaching on the Bachelor of Education course. He enjoyed ecology, for example, using Max Hooper's rule to estimate the age in centuries of a hedgerow by counting the number of woody species in a 30-foot run. In the middle of arguments with the Health Education Authority, he would often recall those days with fondness.

He was deeply interested in young people in his charge, and became involved in the student counselling service. Later, he took a variety of leadership courses that used the T-group or encounter group approach, the last one he attended being led by Terry Waite.

He supported George Foot's course on Human Relationships, which used similar experiential learning techniques. It had something of a

reputation for taking student teachers and turning them into such giants that they could hardly be teachers any more.

Health Education and PSHE

John became involved in Health Education and for many years ran an in-service training Certificate course for teachers.

He took a Master's degree at Nottingham University, where he developed a survey method for canvassing teachers for their views about topics in health and social curriculum. The results could be regarded with some amusement – teachers really told you more about themselves than the pupils in their charge. For example, the importance of 'sex' in responses from male teachers appeared to ... drop off with age.

"I can remember teachers having real eyeball-to-eyeball arguments about what schools should be doing for pupils. These debates were sometimes based on different philosophies or values, but teachers quite often have similar values about their work. What more often seemed to be at issue was what they thought young people were 'really' like.

We have our own experiences of pupils in our charge to reflect upon, and also so important are our own experiences of childhood and of being a parent. But however potent these experiences and reflections, they are necessarily personal, and often strongly affected by particular incidents or colourful stories that could not be owned by others in the group.

This is the key thing that made me start looking for ways of assessing behaviours: wouldn't it be better if, instead of having only our own perceptions about what pupils' lives are like, we asked young people in our community to tell us more about what life was like for them." (Balding, 2005).

This was the foundational principle of the Health-Related Behaviour Questionnaire (HRBQ), an anonymous survey approach to helping teachers listen to pupils. It had a modest start, but a devoted and growing clientele, run under the supervision of Beryl Parkes, allegedly from a broom cupboard.

Growth and development

John's work in the 1970s had attracted national attention: the Health Education Council (HEC) sponsored the use of Just One Minute topic questionnaires in schools, and it was also taken up by the Open University. He employed James Muirden as a Research Officer, who in 1983 established our journal *Education and Health*, and in 1986 published *MayFly*, a compilation of results from the HRBQ, then in 1987 the first of our Young People series, *Young People in 1986*. This led to contrasting national headlines: *Teenagers take homework and drink in moderation*, noted the Guardian, while the Express preferred *Layabout lifestyles of the teenage tipplers*. We have battled with the news media to get proper coverage of young people's issues ever since.

In 1982, John won a more substantial grant from the HEC to run two research projects over 5 years:

- 1) Health Education Topics in the Primary School Curriculum (Just a Tick), a national survey in ten local authorities, led by Teresa Code and Karen Redman.
- 2) A subsidy for schools to take up the Health-Related Behaviour Questionnaire.

The Unit was given liaison support by officers like Hugh Graham, and an Advisory Committee led by Jessie Leighton.

In 1987, the Health Education Authority began a period of further support, managed by Linda Finn and Bill Bellew.

The Unit began offering a Primary School version of HRBQ in 1988, developed by John with Carrie Shelley.

Over these years, the HRBQ had grown to become a widely-used method of consulting young people of great utility to schools, health authorities and county education departments, and resulted in a unique archive of young people's behaviour across the years.

SHEU left the umbrella of the University in 1987 to become an independent organisation. John retired as Director in 2005, and the Unit is now led by his daughter, Angela.

Hard-working family

The facts are simple to relate, but it's less easy to give a flavour of John as a person. He was kind and gentle employer, a wise mentor, a

painstaking researcher, a leader in the world of health education ... He was also a truly Olympic-standard tease, and a man with a tireless fondness for the phrase 'hypodemic nurdle'.

The Unit has been a rather special place to work for the quality of its care and relationships. John had a magic about him in his dealings with people, and it was reflected in the place he created to work. John often referred to it as the "family" – it is a place which looked after you, and a number of waifs and strays came to stay there for a while and gained strength and confidence before taking flight, as well as many who arrived and left as giants.

John was capable of mighty efforts, but was also very content with being quiet and still, coming to the end of what he felt he had to say, either to listen or just to be companionably silent. He did that once while he was interviewing somebody for a job... Annie Wise proved she could manage the moment successfully, and was offered the post.

A lasting legacy

The Unit has grown a lot from the days of Beryl in the broom cupboard, and has had international reputation and an international influence, built on John's vision, drive and characteristic attention to detail. A pupil completing one of his surveys once wrote, "I've never looked at myself in this way before". John had a remarkable capacity for prompting that sort of learning and reflection in others, and we are sure that the survey work continues to achieve it.

Following news of his death, we have been receiving messages from all over the country and abroad, saying how much they appreciated his warmth, his capacity to get things done, and his generous support at the start of their careers. One of those messages from one colleague among many, Alan Tarn from Cumbria:

"I often remember John with fondness and a smile; he helped and inspired me from day one of meeting him. He was always positive with a can-do attitude. He will be greatly missed by so many."

Acknowledgements

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including:

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Education and Health

The journal, published by SHEU since 1983, is aimed at those involved with education and health who are concerned with the health and wellbeing of young people. Readership is worldwide and in the UK include: primary; secondary and further education teachers; university staff and health-care professionals working in education and health settings. The journal is online and open access, continues the proud tradition of independent publishing and offers an eclectic mix of articles.

Contributors (see a recent list) - Do you have up to 3000 words about a relevant issue that you would like to see published? Please contact the Editor

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SHEU Bytes



... JOIN the EMAIL LIST

Young People
into ...

SHEU

Schools and Students Health Education Unit

The specialist provider of reliable local survey data for schools and colleges and recognised nationally since 1977.

"The (named) Children and Young People's Partnership has benefitted from the results of the SHEU survey locally for many years now, and we should like to continue to do so in future."

Consultant in Public Health Medicine

For more details please visit <http://sheu.org.uk>