Tribute to Andrew Herxheimer

WHO Essential Medicines and Health Products Department

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Pharmacology has lost one of its true giants. Andrew Herxheimer, MD, who recently passed away at the age of 90, was both a champion and a critic of 20th century medicine, participating in some of its breakthroughs and tenaciously exposing some of its shortcomings. In most of his activities and writings Andrew was ahead of his time, showing an immense gift for inquiry into medical practice and highlighting the true relationship between the benefits and risks of medicines. The need for objective drug information was a central theme in his career, leading him to contribute to the creation of the International Society of Drug Bulletins, a network of journals whose aim is to provide quality research information independent of any influence from the pharmaceutical industry and other interest groups.

As a result of Andrew’s work, independent information about pharmaceuticals helped to demystify the notion of a ‘safe medicine’. Evidence-based science brought to light that most medicines have significant side effects that may totally reverse the benefits, and the concept of ‘safe drugs’ came to be seen as a marketing gambit, used by companies to promote their products. Andrew also invested vast amounts of energy to capture and organize patients’ own descriptions of their experiences with side effects from medicines and, more broadly, of their diseases and stories.

The World Health Organization is indebted to Andrew Herxheimer in many ways. He participated in the second Expert Committee on the Selection and Use of Essential Medicines in 1979, helping WHO to establish the principle that some medicines are better than others. In 1985, he played a key role in the Conference of Experts on the Rational Use of Drugs - the so-called Nairobi Conference, which brought together world specialists from different disciplines and perspectives, and laid the foundation for WHO’s revised drug strategy and gave impetus to WHO’s Action programme on Essential Drugs.

When he retired in 1992, after 30 years at the International Society of Drug Bulletins, he devoted himself with the enthusiasm and passion of a young researcher to patients’ experiences and later to the Cochrane Group on Adverse events.

Our lasting memory of him is at the Cochrane Colloquium in Vienna last year, still bright, smiling, and unwavering on the need for high-quality research evidence for the good of patients and communities.

Andrew’s strong convictions and work for the public interest have enriched medicine. In an era where financial benefits often eclipse public welfare, his legacy today is more important than ever.

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