

## PROFESSOR DAME ANNE JOHNSON: MD

Chancellor Dharker,

It is our honour today to welcome someone who has made an outstanding contribution to public health, the study of sexual lifestyles and the epidemiology of the HIV virus. Early in her career, she defined public health as “putting science into practice, as well as doing the science” and over four decades of distinguished and pioneering medical practice, that belief has driven and informed her work. Our honorary graduand today is Dame Anne Johnson, Professor Emerita of Infectious Disease Epidemiology at the University College London Institute for Global Health.

Anne was born in Newcastle upon Tyne, and although brought up in Hale, Cheshire, whenever anyone asked where she came from, would always reply, “Newcastle”. Her family has strong links to the region. Her great-grandfather was once Mayor of Gateshead, and throughout her childhood, she spent holidays in Cresswell, on the Northumberland coast. Both parents were Medics, so it wasn't a surprise that Anne also decided to pursue a career in this field. Her friend Sian recalls that at school Anne was “great fun and very good at homework.” In 1971, aged seventeen, she won the Royal Institution Australian Science Scholarship, which involved a world tour, a period at Science School in Sydney, and being presented to the Duke of Edinburgh at Buckingham Palace.

Anne studied medicine at Cambridge University, and for the third year of her Tripos, elected to study social and political sciences. This was quite unusual at the time – most students would have studied anatomy or pathology – and demonstrated the first signs that Anne was broadening her interest into what we now recognise as public health. This broadening of interest continued when she won the Mary Ewart Travelling Scholarship. She used this to travel to South America, spending time in Venezuela and amongst the Yanomami people of the Orinoco Basin. While there, she saw stark evidence of “the relationship between the socio-economic environment and our health”.

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In 1975, Anne decided to return "home" to Newcastle to undertake her clinical training. She lived at Hedley on the Hill and recalls zipping around the region in her Mini. She later trained as a GP, based in Bedlington and Blyth, and during this time saw at first hand the societal damage caused by poverty, domestic violence, and unemployment. She also observed the negative health impact of the low take up of vaccines. It was here that her commitment to improving public health deepened. Newcastle University had, unusually for the time, a placement in Public Health which included lectures in Epidemiology, which Anne attended. She recalls them as a turning point during which "the scales fell from [her] eyes." Anne's blossoming interest in Public Health resonates with the subsequent development of Newcastle's commitment in this area, which includes providing the current base for the National Institute for Health and Care Research School of Public Health Research.

Following an MSc in Community Medicine at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, Anne was keen to progress in her chosen fields. In 1985, she was introduced to Mike Adler, Professor of Genitourinary Infections at the Middlesex Hospital, who was trying to find a lecturer to work on the early epidemiology of HIV/AIDS, and train in public health. This was just the role Anne had been looking for.

The study of the epidemiology of the HIV/AIDS virus was a developing area, and an exciting field in which to be involved, but it's hard to imagine just how stigmatised the disease was back then, and how isolating it was for those who had contracted it. When Anne started working at the Middlesex Hospital, the average life expectancy for AIDS patients after they had been admitted to hospital, was six months. They were kept apart from other patients, in side wards, and contact with them was minimal, as some hospital staff were nervous about entering their rooms. As the number of HIV cases increased, Anne and her colleagues helped design a new ward. When it was ready for its grand opening, Mike Adler contacted Buckingham Palace, and it was decided that the ward would be officially opened by Princess Diana. Anne recalls that "there was such razzamatazz and excitement and, on the day, even the

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Professors were hoovering the carpets". When the Princess arrived, she famously shook a patient's hand without wearing gloves, and the resulting photograph made the front page of many newspapers. This iconic image had a huge impact on the public's perception of HIV/AIDS.

In those early days, there was more of a focus on the nature of the HIV virus, establishing a test for it, and trying to find a cure. However, a unit was subsequently established to study the epidemiology of the virus. Anne attempted to trace its potential trajectory, and – crucially – to confirm that it could be spread by heterosexual intercourse as well as homosexual. She has observed that "epidemiology and statistics is the evidence base...but in the end it is evidence for action". In order to establish that evidence base, Anne and her colleagues realised that they needed more accurate data about the population's sexual behaviour. This led to the development of the National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyle, otherwise known as Natsal.

Natsal is arguably Anne's greatest achievement, but its launch was almost sabotaged. Just before the survey received formal government approval and funding, Margaret Thatcher, the then Prime Minister, decided to veto it, - a decision which featured on the front page of the Sunday Times. As Natsal's Principal Investigator, Anne was suddenly thrust into the public eye. Despite this unwanted pressure, colleagues recall that she remained focussed and resolute. Fortunately, the Wellcome Trust swiftly agreed to provide funding and the results of successive Natsal surveys have influenced public policy outside the realm of medicine, including changes to sex education policy in 2000, the change of the homosexual age of consent in 2001 and the introduction of the National Chlamydia Screening Programme in 2003.

Anne once reflected that "people in public health inevitably get involved in the public domain of policy and politics" and her later career has amply demonstrated this. She has been a governor of the Wellcome Trust, a member of the Adaptation sub-committee of Climate Change Committee, and became President of the UK Academy of Medical Sciences, all of which saw her working

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at the heart of science strategy in the UK. She was also one of the trusted epidemiologists that spoke to an attentive UK population during the Covid-19 pandemic. Her work has been recognised by many honours including the 2002 Terrence Higgins Trust Award for Social Research in Aids, the 2017 Alwyn Smith Prize for Outstanding Contribution to Public Health, and the award of Dame Commander of the British Empire in 2013 for her contribution to the field of HIV, sexual health, and her groundbreaking work on Natsal.

From speaking to colleagues, family and friends, I know that whilst Anne acknowledges her professional achievements, she is most proud of her role as a mentor to medical students, many of whom have become professors themselves, and have made their own vital contribution to epidemiology and public health. Anne has now retired, and whilst she still mentors and advises on a few research projects, has more time for other activities, such as singing (in two choirs), cooking, gardening, and travelling, and spending more time with her family, including her husband John, daughter Sophie – who are both here today – and son Oliver.

Chancellor Dharker, for her outstanding contributions to public health and the epidemiology of the HIV virus, I present to you Professor Dame Anne Johnson for the award of Doctor of Medicine, *honoris causa*.

*Citation by John Williams, Public Orator*

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