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QMUL People - History of Modern Biomedicine Research Group

15 November 2016

The History of Modern Biomedicine Research Group is based in the Arts Research Centre at the Mile End campus. The Wellcome Trust-funded group, led by Professor Tilli Tansey, are known for organising and transcribing Witness Seminars featuring key individuals involved in major landmarks in 20th-century medicine. They talk to e-Bulletin about their work, the challenges and obstacles they face, as well as their favourite interviews.



The History of Modern Biomedicine Research Group (L-R) Professor Tilli Tansey, Mr Alan Yabsley, Mr Adam Wilkinson, Dr Apostolos Zarros, Ms Caroline Overy

Tilli, tell us about the history of the group and your motivations for setting it up.

Tilli: I was a neuroscientist, but I was always interested in medical history. Whilst still in the lab, I had published some historical research on Scottish doctors I knew had worked in Russia, which came to the attention of the Wellcome Trust who were looking for someone to work on 20th-century medical history. So the group first formed in 1993, and I had this idea of doing Witness Seminars because that seemed like an obvious way of getting people to talk. In 2000, we moved to the Wellcome Trust Centre at University College London, then in 2010 we came here and we're now part of the School of History.

How did the idea of the publication of Witness Seminars come about?

Tilli: I organised a meeting at which a historian talked about the development of a particular drug. I had invited colleagues who had been involved in that development, whom the historian had never met. The discussion after the formal talk lasted almost two hours, the scientists coming up with recollections and insights that were new to the speaker. This sort of 'group oral history' seemed almost like open peer-review, and an ideal way of recording some aspects of modern medical history.

So in a sense, it's more dynamic than reading a paper about the subject?

Tilli: Absolutely. People can talk about what happened, and also what went wrong. You don't get that in a published paper, but these are things that historians need to know about.

Alan: Also, because they're group events, people are free to agree or disagree. All we do is transcribe this for posterity for future historians of medicine. That's one of the most satisfying and unique things about Witness Seminars.

Tilli: For example, in an early seminar we had a very distinguished Nobel laureate talking about a key experiment, and someone who had been in the lab with him at the time of the experiment went: "Hang on, it wasn't like that! Don't you remember we were doing this...?" and this Nobel laureate looked at him and said: "Oh my goodness you're right, I've been telling that story for 20 years!"

Alan: Also, when you read papers they're written by scientists and clinicians. But for our Witness Seminars we're also interested in, what might have previously been seen as, the 'lowly technician' who worked in the lab but maybe pioneered the techniques that the scientist or clinician then went on to use. Also, we want to hear from the patients that are affected by the medicine or procedures used. And that's what the project is about, it's about hidden voices that aren't normally put on record.

How do you bring together important early figures in the history of biomedicine, such as the key players in the early heart transplant operations in the UK in the 1960s? What are the challenges and obstacles?

Tilli: When we decided to do the seminar on the first heart transplant, we asked around from people of that generation, we looked at papers, and we cast our net widely. So we didn't just look for the surgeons; we invited the cardiologists who saw their patients dying, we had the medical staff who looked after the first ever heart transplant patients, the anaesthetists, intensive care nurses, etc. Getting their memoirs is very important.

Adam: But of course, people are not always available and in some circumstances sadly they are no longer with us. It's fair to say that in the past, politics has possibly got in the way as well, because towards the seminar date we'll send out a list of participants so everyone can see who's coming, and we have had people subsequently drop out. Maybe it's a coincidence or maybe they saw a name of someone they didn't want to see. But you also get groups that come together and it's like a school reunion of dear friends that haven't seen each other in decades, and it's nice to be there when they meet.

Tilli: It doesn't stop them disagreeing and arguing about things they were arguing about 40 years ago!

In terms of public engagement, how has the research group collaborated with other departments within the university? Are there ongoing opportunities for staff to get involved in the work that you do?

Alan: The seminar on [Seasonal Affective Disorder \(SAD\)](#) was organised in collaboration with Thomas Dixon's group the [Centre for the History of the Emotions](#). We came at the material from the biomedical perspective, whereas Thomas' group looked at the way SAD affects people emotionally.

Tilli: In collaboration with the [Centre of the Cell](#), we have done projects called [Young Roots](#) which involved local school groups of students aged of 14 to 18. We haven't had many collaborations elsewhere but we'd like to.

Alan: Outside of academia, Tilli has provided her expertise in a number of television programmes such as *Heir Hunters* on the BBC, and recently collaborated with filmmaker, [Taslima Khan](#).

Tilli: We not only have our own blog pieces, [Pajamas on Everest](#) being a particular favourite, but we are also invited to contribute to other blogs by the [Wellcome Trust](#), various [medical organisations](#) and [other bodies](#).

What's your favourite 'Witness Seminar' or 'Clips and Conversations', and why?

Adam: [Palliative Medicine](#) is particularly close to me because that is the first one I worked on, and it's the first one I saw through from the very early planning stages to it being published. Another seminar I enjoyed would be our most recent one on the [history of the National Institute for Medical Research \(NIMR\)](#) and the technicians.

Caroline: I agree with Adam. Palliative Medicine was the first one I worked on right the way through and I enjoyed that very much. I also enjoyed the [5-HT seminar](#) which was a very enjoyable meeting – the participants were great fun. [Migraine](#) was also a very interesting meeting.

Alan: The highlight for me was [Waste](#), because it was slightly different from the biomedical material that we normally do and are best known for. But coming back to the SAD meeting, we were lucky enough to interview two very eminent people from that meeting as part of our newer series: [Clips and Conversations](#). One was [Professor Norman Rosenthal](#) who wrote the landmark paper that named SAD. The other one was a fascinating lady called [Professor Josephine Arendt](#) whose self-experimentation with melatonin gave rise to a whole strand of research which has had implications for shift workers.

Apostolos: I think my favourite volume will be the final volume. It will be a showcase of what this group has achieved over the years and the wealth of information it has provided the medical history community and those interested in the advancement of modern biomedicine.

Tilli: Well we've held well over 60 meetings and over 1,200 scientists have participated. I can honestly say there wasn't a meeting I disliked, but there are some that are favourites. Alan mentioned [Waste](#) and we had a wonderful man there called [Ernie Sharp](#) who started on the bins, aged 14 in Lewisham and worked his way up to the London County Council hierarchy, without a formal education. Then when he retired he decided he'd get an education so he worked his way up and achieved a masters.

Adam: I think he was 88 when he got his masters.

Tilli: When he came to the Witness Seminar he was 92 and he asked me if he should do a PhD and I said he should go for it. Sadly he died a year after.

Are there any upcoming events or publications we should keep an eye out for?

Apostolos: There is a Witness Seminar coming up hopefully in the next two months which will be on tumour necrosis factor (TNF) and how it became a therapeutic target.

Alan: When we conduct the individual interviews, one of the questions we ask people is "How did you become interested in science / medicine?" and we're hoping to package together those clips as an education resource for young people who may be interested in that as a possible career.

For more information about the History of Modern Biomedicine Research Group, please visit their [website](#), and follow their work on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).

If you are interested in collaborating with the Group, please contact the project office: modbiomed@qmul.ac.uk

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