

Keith Ball

Dr Keith Ball, who died in January aged 92, was one of the unsung giants of tobacco control. A distinguished cardiologist at the Central Middlesex Hospital in London, UK, he was a major contributor to the 1962, 1971 and 1977 reports on tobacco and disease by the Royal College of Physicians of London, and published over five decades on virtually all aspects of tobacco, with a focus on cardiovascular disease, cessation and tobacco control.

In an era before tobacco control advocacy had been invented, Keith was one of the medical leaders who determined after the 1971 report that more action was needed, and co-founded Action on Smoking and Health (ASH) under the College's auspices. Keith served as honorary secretary, then chairman of ASH, until 1982, remaining closely involved for many years more.

Despite his gentle style, Keith enjoyed the cut and thrust of dealing with media and politicians and confronting the tobacco industry. He was the first doctor to attend British tobacco companies' annual general meetings, representing ASH, a one-share shareholder, to ask embarrassing questions about the companies' deadly business. He chivvied his medical colleagues into action and lobbied government ministers, civil servants and journalists. Tobacco executives debating with this apparently gentle figure in the media had few responses when he described patients he had seen that morning. When tobacco bosses asked to meet him in the early 1970s, he insisted that they accompany him on a ward round, meeting patients who were ill or dying because of the companies' products. He was a wonderful mentor to ASH staff, including ourselves, his two directors, available at any hour and invariably supportive.

From the late 1970s Keith was a pioneer in championing tobacco control in developing countries, facing obstacles even greater than they are now. Those fortunate to travel with him found that his mentorship was not limited to tobacco: it seemed that in almost every hospital corridor in Africa, Asia and the Middle East he was greeted by a consultant who had once been his house officer. He was noted for keeping contact with them, keenly interested in their careers and families. He was especially involved with Ladakh, in northern India, which he regularly visited well into his seventies, helping to establish a public health institute tackling tobacco and other lifestyle issues, and trying to guard against unhealthy influences he knew would invade it with increased tourism.

He was ahead of his time in other areas, especially the dietary aspects of

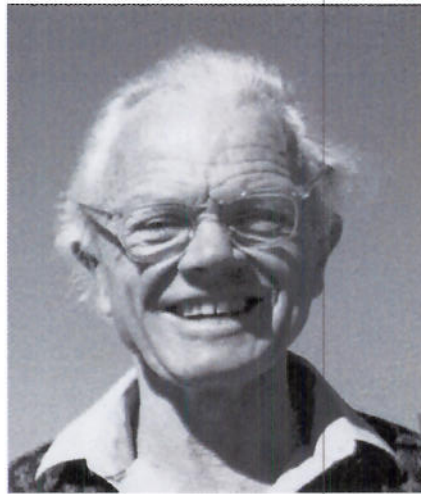


Figure 1 Dr Keith Ball.

cardiovascular disease. He took on anti-health forces from the dairy and manufactured food industries, as well as less enlightened medical colleagues, from the early 1980s. He co-founded the Coronary Prevention Group with a long-time colleague, Dick Turner, actively lending medical support to that and the later, still pre-eminent National Heart Forum.

Tobacco industry documents show that they saw Keith as a major adversary. His legacy can be found in his work as a physician, seminal contributions to the literature, early major reports on smoking and health, generating medical action on smoking, helping to start and lead advocacy organisations in tobacco control and diet, and the unqualified admiration and affection of all who worked with him. The many whose lives he touched will remember him with a word uttered countless times in tributes paid at his quiet but overflowing Quaker funeral: kindness. That millions of people around the world already share a greater life expectancy as a result of public health movements whose seeds he helped to sow, in a long lifetime of brave and tireless work, often against considerable opposition, is his greatest legacy of all, a kindness to all humanity.

Keith Percy Ball. 8 December 1915–10 January 2008.

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