

Wednesday 21 August 2019

“It is a mark of a civilised society that we have a National Health Service,”

says Dr. Kenneth Calman.

Kenneth Calman has been a cornerstone of British Medicine for the last few decades. As a former Chief Medical Officer of Scotland, and later England, he has navigated the National Health Service and Government around issues like Mad Cow Disease, the HIV epidemic and developing cancer care treatment in Scotland. He appeared at The Edinburgh International Book Festival today to discuss his autobiography, *It Started in a Cupboard: Adventures in Life, Learning and Happiness*, in an event chaired by BBC Political Editor, Brian Taylor.

Raised by working class parents from Glasgow, Calman’s father died when he was nine years old. To help earn extra money, his widowed mother took in boarders to the house, making space in the family home scarce. For Calman, a small cupboard with one shelf and no light was where he began his journey, “indeed, my entire academic career began in a cupboard.”

Calman’s career saw him work his way up through medical positions until he was the Chief of Oncology, a completely new department in The Western Infirmary Glasgow, “It was a very difficult, wonderful experience, trying to build up an oncology unit from nothing. I had no staff, no offices, I had a secretary, no patients either. So building that up over a ten year period was one of the most challenging things I’ve done, but enormously valuable to me.

“What I realised early on in dealing with patients with cancer and their families, is that they knew more about it than I did. They knew what the problems were and how to deal with some of these problems, whether it was hair falling out or not feeling well after treatment.

“My wife and I invited twenty patients and their families to the house, just to hear from them and how things could be better, how things could be improved, what we could help with. We wrote a series of little booklets for patients, some of which were written by the patients themselves and that was again positive.”

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When asked how he felt about the route that modern oncology and cancer treatment has gone in Scotland, Calman replied that he was impressed and happy about how the process that he started has evolved. “I think it’s very good. I think there’s a very real view now that this is not just about the size and chemotherapy, it’s about looking after real people who need real help and they can help you too.”

“In terms of determinants of health, genetics for example, we’re getting better and better and better at understanding in terms of precision medicine, for example, what needs to be done...that must increase the cost. When I think back to my early days at The Western Infirmary in Glasgow with an x-ray machine and that was it and what do you have now? Tonnes of things, which are marvellous and can identify things which we could not have done before. All of that means money and some of us are getting slightly older, which didn’t happen quite so much in the earlier days.”

As someone who attributes much of his success and outlook in life towards his relationship with religion, Calman says it has been an important aspect of his life, “in terms of the concept of love, and the concept of love for people that you don’t know and you’ve never met before. Different colours and races, that’s been really quite important to me. In terms of the clinical work I’ve done that has been really very important to me. Partly in terms of helping patients, but also helping myself cope with difficult situations at times.

“The whole purpose of religion is not to preach to yourself or to other people. The whole purpose is getting out there and doing things in the community.”