



# OBSERVATIONS

## BMJ CONFIDENTIAL

# William Frankland: From Fleming to Saddam Hussein



## What was your best career move?

Working in the allergy department of St Mary's Hospital from 1946, after more than six years in the Royal Army Medical Corps.

## Bevan or Lansley? Who has been the best and the worst health secretary in your lifetime?

Bevan's NHS was an inspired idea: Britain would become a healthier nation. Many consultants thought that their income would fall, but the president of the Royal College of Physicians was in favour of the NHS. Bevan would not have realised that his NHS would become the envy of the world—although it is now underfunded, under-doctored, and overstretched.

## Who was your most grateful patient?

Saddam Hussein. In the late 1970s he was being incorrectly treated, and I was asked to go to Baghdad to treat his asthma and allergies. He didn't have asthma or allergies, but he was smoking more than 40 cigarettes a day. I advised him to stop smoking. Three and a half months later he was dramatically better and, because he was so grateful, I was invited back to Baghdad with my family to have lunch with him.

## Who is the person you would most like to thank, and why?

Maurice Lessoff. At 65 I was retired from St Mary's Hospital, and he offered me employment at Guy's. I worked there until age 85.

## To whom would you most like to apologise?

My late wife. I spent too much time away from home, travelling the world lecturing.

## If you were given £1m what would you spend it on?

I'd give it to my favourite charity, Asthma UK, to spend on research only.

## What was your earliest ambition?

To be a doctor: solving the causes of people's illnesses would be like solving a detective story, I thought. No altruistic motives.

## Who has been your biggest inspiration?

Alexander Fleming, whom I had to see every day at 10 am in the last two years of his life. I was his clinical assistant at St Mary's Hospital, and I was supposed to keep him informed about the patients in a ward with complicated diseases. We talked about everything but the patients.

## What was the worst mistake in your career?

Not realising that a medical history, as told by a mother about her (deceased) baby, was all lies.

**Biography**

William (Bill) Frankland, 104, is Britain's oldest active scientist. Born before the first world war, he may contemplate retirement when he turns 105 next March. He qualified at St Mary's Hospital Medical School in London and served in the Royal Army Medical Corps. After more than three years as a prisoner of the Japanese he returned to St Mary's and specialised in allergies. He collaborated with Alexander Fleming on penicillin, started daily pollen counts in 1953, and championed desensitisation as an allergy treatment. In the early 1950s he carried out double blind placebo trials in allergy and asthma. He is an honorary fellow of his old college, Queen's College, Oxford.

**Where are or were you happiest?**

Weekends gardening in the country.

**What single unheralded change has made the most difference in your field in your lifetime?**

I'm totally bewildered and utterly astonished by research work in genes and immunology on a molecular basis. In allergic complaints, immunotherapy has been successfully used for over a 100 years, but under trial now is an RNA and nanoparticle based immunotherapy vaccine against all forms of cancer. We used to be interested in patients; now the interest is in their cells.

**Do you support doctor assisted suicide?**

Yes.

**What book should every doctor read?**

*The Story of San Michele* and *Memories and Vagaries*, by Axel Munthe. I read these at 16 and was determined to become a doctor.

**What poem, song, or passage of prose would you like mourners at your funeral to hear?**

A choir singing "God be in my head, and in my understanding."

**What is your guiltiest pleasure?**

Talking too much while eating with friends.

**What television programmes do you like?**

*University Challenge*.

**What is your most treasured possession?**

My home.

**What, if anything, are you doing to reduce your carbon footprint?**

I've given up flying, but this wasn't the reason.

**What personal ambition do you still have?**

To live another six months, as this will save a great deal in tax.

**Summarise your personality in three words**

Luck, longevity, and loquaciousness.

**Where does alcohol fit into your life?**

Hardly at all. The pleasures and perils of alcohol have escaped me.

**What is your pet hate?**

Anyone smoking.

**What would be on the menu for your last supper?**

If not anorexic, I'd have lamb with mint sauce, new potatoes, and garden peas, followed by apple pie and lots of custard.

**Do you have any regrets about becoming a doctor?**

No regrets—I've enjoyed being a doctor immensely.

**If you weren't in your present position what would you be doing instead?**

The same.