

Dannie Abse: doctor and poet

Dr Dannie Abse, an Honorary Fellow of the Fellowship of Postgraduate Medicine, died after a short illness on 28 September 2014. Abse was both a doctor and a distinguished poet. He was a central figure within the Hippocrates Initiative for Poetry and Medicine¹ as a member of the International Board of the Hippocrates Press and as a regular contributor to readings of Hippocrates poetry and medicine events during the first 5 years of the initiative. He was also in 2010 the first poet judge of the now internationally established Hippocrates Awards for Poetry and Medicine, from which winning poems have been published in the *PMJ*.^{2,3} He brought to this new award for unpublished poetry on a medical theme incisive dual insight as doctor and poet. Over the subsequent 4 years, until his final short illness, he continued to introduce a new generation of health professional poets to his poetry on medicine in the broadest sense, through new collections and through readings of his work.

In Appendix Six, the last appendix in Abse's book *The Presence* written after the death of his wife Joan in 2005, Abse quotes Beethoven, 'I heard nothing, or when someone heard the shepherd sing and again, I heard nothing... I might easily have put an end to my life. Only one thing, Art, held me back...'

The centre of Abse's life was poetry and the writing of poems. As a medical student at the University of Wales College of Medicine, and then at Westminster Hospital Medical School and King's College London, he spent hours with paper and pencil scribbling words. This writing took up so much of his time that he took quite a few attempts at his finals before he passed his exams. His father is reported to have said, 'I don't care if he is the next Homer, he's got to earn a living', and, when Dannie finally showed success, his father's comment was, 'About bloody time'. So much was his passion for this art form that it sustained him throughout his medical practice as a chest physician in London, where he worked as a specialist at the Central Medical Establishment Chest Clinic between 1954 and 1989. He has over 30 books to his name—poetry, novels, plays and other prose books—but his love was for poetry. He has published over 16 books of poetry and has a new book coming out imminently, *Ask the Moon*, which, given the time of his death, seems particularly apt.

Abse's poetry helped him to come to terms with certain things in the human condition. The writing of his remarkable book, *The Presence*, after the death of his wife in a car crash shows how her absence dominated every waking moment of his days. The material in his book, *White coat, purple coat*, draws on his medical experiences uniting his humanity and poetic prowess.

I have seen the colour rose, and it is lovely,
but not when it ripens in a tumour (from 'Pathology of colours')
and
Leave my soul alone, leave my soul alone,
that voice so arctic and that cry so odd
had nowhere else to go... (from 'In the theatre')

A very fine poem crafted to perfection with empathy and feeling for another human being, combining medical practice with wit and skill into a poetic form—Abse's strength. Most of the works that appear in this collection, *White coat, purple coat*, are distinguished by clarity of expression and formal accomplishment.

His many awards and distinctions included Senior Fellowship in the Humanities at Princeton University (1973–1974), President of the Poetry Society (1978–1992), appointed Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 1983, Fellow of the Welsh Academy of Letters in 1992 (President from 1995), Honorary Fellow at the University of Wales College of Medicine (1999), and Honorary Fellowship of Postgraduate Medicine in 2013. He was awarded an honorary doctorate by the Universities of Wales (1989) and Glamorgan (1997) and awarded the CBE in 2012.

Last year, Hutchinson published *Speak old parrot*, a book of poems that speak of old age and impending death, but they are never dismal, only reflections on life's journey.

Abse is survived by his three children and trusted friend over the past 6 years, Lynne Hjelmgaard.

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Competing interests None.

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- 2 Singer DR, Hulse M. International Hippocrates Prize for Poetry and Medicine. *Postgrad Med J* 2010;**86**:66–7.
- 3 [No authors listed]. 2011 Hippocrates Prize. *Postgrad Med J* 2011;**87**:165.