



Matilda Petersson

Peter Byass

Epidemiologist who specialised in measuring and evaluating population health in Africa and Asia. Born on April 3, 1957, in Bedford, UK, he died from a heart attack on Aug 16, 2020, in Bedfordshire, UK, aged 63 years.

Peter Byass's wide-ranging career in global health was characterised by his deep commitment to strengthening capacity, whether it was of the students he mentored, the networks he helped develop, or the health systems of the countries across Asia and Africa where he did much of his research. "It's not an overstatement to say that my life and career were shaped by Peter Byass. I owe him so much. He was my colleague, [PhD] supervisor, and mentor, but most importantly he was my friend", said WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus. "His style was not to tell me what to do, but to make proposals for me to consider." Tedros added that "Peter empowered me and challenged me to aim high and think big, while all the time maintaining the friendship." Byass did the same for dozens of his students and collaborators, while championing their work and helping to advance their careers. "He was there supporting, but always with the ambition to make people stronger", said Maria Nilsson, Professor in Public Health at the Department of Epidemiology and Global Health at Umeå University, Sweden.

Byass focused not only on developing the abilities of his students and collaborators, but also on improving networks and tools to strengthen the capacity of health systems. He worked on various population health measurement issues in Africa and Asia, notably death registration and mortality surveillance. His development of an algorithm, InterVA, to assess probable causes of death based on verbal autopsies helped fill critical gaps. InterVA was "groundbreaking...It's an approach to empower and inform governments, health ministries, and scientists, as well as to hold up a mirror to the world to the situation as it is", said Stephen Tollman, the Director of the MRC/Wits Rural Public Health and Health

Transitions Research Unit (Agincourt), University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa.

Byass studied chemistry at the University of Nottingham, UK, completed an MSc in information science in 1984 from what is now the University of Hertfordshire, and received a PhD in public health from the University of Nottingham; his 1990 thesis on microcomputer support for health-care delivery drew on his work as head of the computer section of the then Medical Research Council Laboratories in Fajara, The Gambia. His research and teaching career flourished, eventually bringing him to the nascent Department of Epidemiology and Global Health at Umeå University, where he became Professor of Global Health and Director of the Centre for Global Health Research. "He contributed a lot to the globalisation of our research at the university", said Stig Wall, the department's founding head and now Professor Emeritus. "You have to learn how to work across disciplines. Peter was very good at that", said Wall.

Byass's cross-disciplinary outlook was evident when he served as Lucia D'Ambruso's PhD supervisor. D'Ambruso, now Senior Lecturer and Associate Director of the Aberdeen Centre for Health Data Science at the University of Aberdeen, was investigating causes of maternal deaths from a qualitative social science perspective. Although he came from epidemiology, "he embraced the difference in disciplines and always welcomed me", she said. "He enabled many important collaborations across world regions as well as scientific disciplines, underpinned by the values of rigorous inquiry, integrity, respect, cooperation, and inclusion." Those values also guided his contributions to the INDEPTH Network, a global network of health and demographic surveillance systems. He was one of the founding contributors and served as chair of INDEPTH's scientific advisory committee for several years. "He infused inclusion and cooperative working into that system", said D'Ambruso, who has collaborated with INDEPTH. Byass leveraged his role in INDEPTH to pursue work on verbal autopsy, contributing to methods and analyses informing comparative research on cause of death and health development more broadly. "He had a breadth of vision, a lot of insight, and he was exceptional in his ability to convey complex ideas simply, whether speaking or writing", said Tollman, who first met him at a foundational INDEPTH meeting.

Among his many other accomplishments, Byass was central to making his Umeå University department the Swedish representative for the *Lancet* Countdown on health and climate change. He also followed Wall as chief editor of *Global Health Action*. "It's a big hole that he leaves and we will miss him a lot, but he has also helped to fill that space with students and collaborators, so we are not left totally alone. He has equipped us with tools and approaches that we will capitalise on. His legacy is really that", Wall said. Byass leaves his wife, Margaret, and sons, Mark, Paul, and Richard.

Andrew Green