

Obituary

Gareth Davies

An exemplary leader promoting epidemiology in the veterinary profession.

GARETH Davies played a major role in establishing epidemiology as a component of veterinary sciences. His legacy, as a founder of the Society for Veterinary Epidemiology and Preventive Medicine (SVEPM), is a flourishing international society that concludes its annual conferences with a plenary lecture given in Gareth's name.

Brought up in Neath, South Wales, Gareth entered Bristol veterinary school in 1953, graduating in 1960. He spent two years in practice with Colin Gould in Southampton and then joined the government's veterinary investigation service, which provided a diagnostic referral service to practices dealing with farm livestock. Gareth was later allocated to its Weybridge unit. Restless, but supported by his wife, Sheila, and despite opposition, he took unpaid leave to pursue the diploma in bacteriology course at Manchester university.

Gareth was hardly back in Weybridge before he was sent to Kenya as part of a team from the Weybridge and Pirbright laboratories to support the East African Veterinary Research Organization at its Muguga laboratory, near Nairobi.

His responsibility was to lead a small team for the control of contagious bovine pleuropneumonia, a task that included vaccine production, mainly for disease control in northern Uganda.

Three years in Africa seeded Gareth's interest in epidemiology. Safaris into the Masai Mara and tribal lands caused him to question conventional wisdom about how epidemic cattle diseases spread. Close attention to how disease was manifested, coupled with reflection about the role of the wider production environment, raised questions needing better answers. It also sensitised him to the politics of situations where official policy

Gareth Davies, BVSc, DipBact, MRCVS, (b) 1935, (q) Bristol 1960. Died 23 February 2023

conflicted with what worked at a local level.

As a result of his African experience, on returning to the UK Gareth was transferred to the Central Veterinary Laboratory (CVL) with the team that provided laboratory support and a centralised testing unit for the UK's brucellosis eradication programme. Focused on policy relating to vaccine choice, the department's conclusions led to changes that proved effective in reducing the number of infected herds and, eventually, the elimination of *Brucella abortus* from the UK cattle population.

In 1975, Gareth was appointed head of the recently established Epidemiology Unit at CVL, a position he occupied for 11 years. Under his leadership, the usefulness of the unit's work was increasingly recognised. Colleagues were trusted to get on with their projects, encouraged to expand their professional networks and extend their own capacities. His management style was laissez-faire, but his door always open to help resolve problems.

His role in creating the SVEPM was really an extension of this outlook. Its conception was marked by a letter to *The Veterinary Record*.¹ At the time, none of the UK veterinary schools had staff experienced in epidemiology. The RCVS had resisted an appeal to include epidemiology in undergraduate studies on the grounds that courses were already overcrowded. Crucially, the letter's authors envisaged a society that 'would include among its membership not only veterinary surgeons from general practice, universities, commerce and government service but also statisticians, economists and ecologists working with domesticated animal populations'.

The idea fell on fertile ground. What became the SVEPM's inaugural meeting in Edinburgh in 1982 saw a robust debate about the appropriate mix for such a forum. Gareth argued strongly for a multidisciplinary approach, and not one restricted to BVA members for participation. Carrying the day, he emerged as

the newborn society's first president. A lecture to the Association of Veterinary Teachers and Research Workers was evidence of his intuitive feel for the breadth of disciplinary foundations of veterinary epidemiology.² Many of us, including economists, owe Gareth a debt of gratitude for pointing our research in novel directions and securing the financial resources to enable it.

After 16 years in Weybridge, Gareth moved to the Veterinary Service headquarters in Tolworth, where his work increasingly looked towards Europe. From 1990 to 1994, he served in the European Commission's veterinary team in Brussels. As the commission's roving epidemiologist, he advised member states on veterinary service structures and dealing with disease threats. Thereafter, including for the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, he worked in Bolivia, Turkey, the Balkan states, Mali, Tanzania and Malawi.

In retirement, gardening, local politics, the church and his Welsh heritage occupied Gareth. He was a modest, good-humoured, open-minded and supportive man who made a real difference in the field of veterinary sciences.

Eddie Goodall, Keith Howe, Fraser Menzies, Andrew Paterson, Michael Thrusfield, John Wilesmith



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- 2 Davies G. Art, science and mathematics: new approaches to animal health problems in the agricultural industry. *Vet Rec*. 1985; 117:263–267