

Forgotten pioneer who blazed a trail in Covid-19 battle

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A pioneer of the modern fight against epidemics provided inspirational leadership in the darkest days of the Second World War but he remains largely unknown today.

Sir Wilson Jameson believed that public health worked better if it involved the public and he blazed so many new trails in his ten years as chief medical officer that it is difficult to count them. Later, he played critical roles in establishing the National Health Service and World Health Organization, two bodies at the forefront of the fight against Covid-19.

Jameson did not want to be chief medical officer in the first place, having previously compared the dynamics of Whitehall's health department to that of a chaotic girls' school. He was persuaded to take the role in 1940 by Michael MacDonal, the health minister and son of the former prime minister, Ramsay.

Born in Perth, Jameson was educated in Aberdeen. Like many Scottish medical graduates, he went south for work as a GP and hospital doctor.

In 1939 Whitehall adopted a more open propaganda approach, perhaps mindful of the downside of strict censorship in the First World War. People found out anyway. The 1918 influenza became known as Spanish flu because the news first came from Spain.

Jameson made full use of radio, films and publicity. The focus was on what people could do, rather than simply lecturing them from on high.

He instituted monthly press confer-

Spreading the message

"Coughs and Sneezes Spread Diseases" was a celebrated public health campaign during Sir Wilson Jameson's time as chief medical officer. The catchphrase was coined in the US in 1918 and is still in use by the World Health Organisation.

A light-hearted film was released in cinemas in 1945 by health officials, featuring a man sneezing everywhere. He was, in fact, a doctor: Richard Massingham worked as senior medical officer at the London Fever Hospital before switching to his passion for film-making and acting.

An earlier film from 1943 on the same theme was more explicit on the wider purpose — to maintain war production.



ences, driving home the message that germs were more dangerous than Germans.

In May 1941 he launched the first concerted vaccination campaign, against diphtheria. He was the first civil servant to make a BBC radio broadcast, and he pulled no punches: "Have you ever seen a child suffering from a severe attack of diphtheria — the dirty, evil-smelling throat, the swollen neck glands, the horrible forms of paralysis that only too often follow the attack days or even weeks later? In my view it's nothing short of a disgrace that there's still so much diphtheria about. There needn't be if only you will play your part."

The next year he made another broadcast at peak time on things that

were never talked about: tuberculosis and venereal disease. His Aberdonian accent helped — a soothing overlay to his calm, measured delivery.

Jameson's role covered England and Wales. Then, as now, Scotland had its own chief medical officer in Sir Andrew Davidson. Joint working was the norm both for the emergency hospital service and promoting public health.

He was also the calming intermediary between the Labour health minister, Nye Bevan, and the British Medical Association in the creation of the NHS. Bevan trusted Jameson and his fellow Scot, Sir William Douglas, permanent secretary at the health department.

After a busy week he would spend Saturday mornings discussing international health. Jameson became an architect of the World Health Organization, leading the UK delegation at its first assembly in 1948.

His was the decade of unprecedented improvements in child health, despite the war and its aftermath. In 1941 there were 60 babies and children a week dying from diphtheria — by 1949 this had dropped to fewer than two a week.

Mental health was another taboo he confronted, becoming the first chief medical officer to mention it in an annual report in 1948.

On retiring in May 1950, he described himself as "an average boy" from Aberdeen Grammar School. Bevan thought differently, breaking another taboo in the tenth anniversary debate on the NHS in 1958 when he ignored the parliamentary convention of civil service anonymity by naming Jameson and Douglas.

"The nation was extremely fortunate in having two eminent civil servants of that calibre at the ministry," he said.

"I am quite certain that if honourable members and the nation generally knew how much work they did and what a huge task it was, they would feel very grateful indeed."