

Sir Michael Rutter: Pioneer, legend, and father of modern child psychiatry

Dear Editor,

Sir Michael Llewellyn Rutter CBE FRS FRCP FRCPsych FMedSci (Aug 15, 1933–Oct 23, 2021) was a British psychiatrist who was widely considered as the ‘father of modern child psychiatry’. Rutter revolutionised our understanding of child and adolescent mental health. He laid the groundwork for the development of fields of child psychiatry and developmental psychopathology.^[1] His appointment as professor of child psychiatry in the United Kingdom was historic since he was the first one of his kind. Rutter’s work is more relevant than ever when mental health issues among children and adolescents are on the increase. According to a 2002 study published in the Review of General Psychology, Rutter was the 68th most cited expert in the field of psychology in the twentieth century.^[2] Because of the thoroughness and integrity of his work, he made a significant contribution to help guide future solutions to psychological ailments in young people.^[3]

Professor Rutter was the eldest child of his parents, Winifred and Llewellyn Rutter. He was born on August 15, 1933, in Broummana, Lebanon. His father was working as a doctor and his mother was a homemaker, and the family moved back to England when Michael was young. Rutter was sent to North America with his younger sister, Priscilla in the early 1940s, when he was seven years old, due to concerns of a German invasion and possible harm to them during the second world war. He went to New Jersey’s Moorestown Friends School and later joined Wolverhampton Grammar School. He also studied in York’s Bootham School, after which he went to the University of Birmingham in England for medicine, with postgraduate studies in neurology and paediatrics. After the completion of his undergraduate degree in 1956, Dr Rutter practised in British hospitals before becoming a paediatric resident at Albert Einstein College of Medicine in the Bronx from 1961 to 1962. In 1966, he began working at the Institute of Psychiatry and completed his psychiatric training at the Maudsley Hospital.^[4]

Professor Sir Michael Rutter’s outstanding career, which laid the basis of child psychiatry and developmental psychopathology, inspired thousands of clinicians worldwide. His work has lasted more than five decades, and he has produced an impressive amount of high-impact

research and landmark publications with more than 280,000 citations as per Google Scholar.^[5] He has published over 400 empirical papers and 40 books throughout his career, many of which have had a lasting influence on our knowledge of child development. Rutter studied institutional care impacts on children for many years.^[6] His find that autism or infantile psychosis as it was known back then has hereditary origins was something that was rarely understood at the time and was a major advancement in child neuroscience.^[7]

Rutter questioned Bowlby’s attachment theory, which was considered to be well established at that time, claiming that numerous attachments were more crucial for children rather than solitary attachment to the mother.^[8] He explored the genesis of numerous disorders in teenagers such as antisocial personality traits, affectionless psychopathology, and extended views about the end product of failed attachment bonds in the early years of life.^[9] Rutter studied adopted children born in Romania and the United Kingdom. In this pioneering study, they found that there is a close association between duration of deprivation and severity of attachment disorder in children, and were correlated with attentional, conduct problems, and cognitive level.^[10] Furthermore, the Isle of Wight studies are considered the beginning of child psychiatric epidemiology and were among the first to investigate developmental problems in representative, population-based samples in children.^[11] In the 1960s and 1970s, Dr Rutter examined the mental health state of children living on the island, and for the first time, children were personally interviewed and questioned.^[12]

For 55 years, he worked at King’s College London’s Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology, and Neuroscience after receiving the United Kingdom’s first Professorship in Child Psychiatry in 1973. He was knighted in 1992 in recognition of his achievements in the profession. He has received a whole slew of accolades and prizes from across the world and was named a fellow of the Royal Society in the year 1987.^[13] The Society for Research in Child Development and the International Society for Research in Child and Adolescent Psychopathology have elected him as their President. He was the director of the Medical Research Council’s child psychiatry research unit for many years leading and conducting landmark studies and also headed

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the Social, Genetic and Developmental Psychiatry Research Centre in London, United Kingdom.^[14] Further, Professor Rutter decorated many other organisations including the Wellcome Trust as the governor and the Young Minds, a charity devoted to helping adolescents' mental health and well-being as the vice president. Sir Rutter also served as the chairman of the Changing Adolescence initiative of the Nuffield Foundation that explored the causes behind the rise in the number of mental health issues in young people and how the population transformed over the decades.^[15]

Even though Rutter lived and conducted research predominantly in the West, his contributions to neuroscience and developmental health are global. The psychometric instruments he created and validated were used from the most affluent settings in the world to the poorest socio-cultural contexts.^[16] Professor Rutter's trendsetting textbook, 'Rutter's Child and Adolescent Psychiatry', was read by trainees and experts in child and adolescent mental health around the globe for many decades. This created the standard and a framework to learn psychopathology and practise child and adolescent mental healthcare for many.

Sir Michael Rutter died of Cancer on Oct 23, 2021, and is survived by his wife, Marjorie Heys, their children, Christine, Stephen, and Sheila, his seven grandchildren and his sister, Priscilla. We are all inspired by his contributions to global health, which he made while tirelessly advocating for the mental health and well-being of children and adolescents. The depth of the sorrow and despair felt by so many people upon hearing of his death is a testament to how much he meant to the field of psychiatry and developmental health. We owe him the duty of carrying on the upward progress, and Professor Michael Rutter will be greatly missed.

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Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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