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It has been said that when you're face to face with a difficulty, you are up against a discovery. Roald Dahl was beset by personal tragedies which inspired dogged crusades to improve lives

Making the world a better place, and building something good from going through something terrible, are honourable aims achieved by few—but Dahl did both. Inspired by love for his son, his daughter and his wife, he set about inventing a brain shunt, promoting vaccination and transforming stroke rehabilitation. Today there are also a band of children's nurses that bear his name, his legacy being not only as a best-loved children's author but also as a man who has made an enduring mark in medicine.

The brain shunt inspired by his son

At the age of four months, Dahl's son Theo was hit by a taxi while in his pram. His head was shattered and his brain developed hydrocephalus—an accumulation of fluid that can lead to blindness, brain damage and death. Treatment consists of a shunt, or tube, to drain the fluid—but Theo's tube blocked repeatedly. Roald got angrier and angrier, saying: "With everything science has come up with, why can't they produce one little clog-proof tube?"

Exasperated by Theo's eight shunt operations in 30 months, Dahl turned to Stanley Wade, a toymaker skilled in developing tiny hand-built planes, and Kenneth Till, England's first full-time children's neurosurgeon, to develop a shunt known as the Wade-Dahl-Till valve.

Now superseded by other designs, Dahl's shunt was placed in about 5000 patients, though Theo luckily never needed it as he recovered.

The call to vaccination inspired by his daughter

"Roald was just destroyed," writes Patricia Neal, his wife of 30 years, when describing the death of their seven-

year-old daughter Olivia from a complication of measles. She writes of the “landslide of anger and frustration that would all but bury Roald and me in the months to come. I knew Roald wanted to die. He all but lost his mind after Olivia died”.

When the measles vaccine later became widely available, Roald understandably became an ardent supporter, penning an open letter [5] to parents pleading for them to have their children immunised. For those who refuse “out of obstinacy or ignorance or fear” he described it as almost a crime to allow your child to go unimmunised, and that there would be more chance of your child “choking to death on a chocolate bar than of becoming seriously ill from a measles immunisation”. Strong words indeed and still timely today, with the World Health Organization saying we are now in the middle of a global measles crisis [6].

New ways in stroke rehabilitation inspired by his wife

In 1965, Dahl’s wife suffered a series of massive strokes [7], which left her needing to learn to speak and walk again. Unimpressed by the single hours of professional therapy prescribed to his wife, Dahl decided that she must be occupied for at least six hours a day in order to make real progress, and set about recruiting relatives and friends to become her teachers.

After six months a neighbour called Valerie Eaton Griffith [8]took over the teaching, and for two years coaxed Patricia back to near complete recovery, proving that as well as becoming good friends, good neighbours might also play an essential part in recovery after stroke. Simplicity was the secret of her success, and her manual [9] is a must for the families and friends of stroke patients everywhere; her work inspired the formation of the Stroke Association.

The children’s nurses who bear his name

Dahl died in 1990, but “Roald Dahl’s Marvellous Children’s Charity” continues his legacy, creating more than 70 nursing posts [10] across the UK. The nurses specialise in looking after children with conditions such as epilepsy, blood diseases, brain injury and rare diseases. One “SWAN” nurse [11] is committed to caring for children with undiagnosed conditions (‘Syndromes Without A Name’), providing invaluable practical, emotional and social support. Approximately 6000 children are born in the UK each year with a genetic condition as yet undiagnosed.

Throughout his life, Dahl lent his celebrity to causes and illnesses in desperate need of attention, writes neurosurgeon Dr Adam Sandler, and this continues today.

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