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## Scientist who discovered link between exercise and a healthy heart dies aged 99

Jeremy Morris: 6 May 1910 – 28 October 2009

17 November 2009

Professor Jeremy (Jerry) Morris, an award-winning MRC scientist who died last month at the age of 99, was always rigorous in adopting advice supported by scientific evidence. When his own research proved for the first time a link between lack of physical exercise and heart disease, Jerry took up jogging on Hampstead Heath. It seems to have been a good way of life, as Jerry was still working regularly at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, even in the last few weeks before he died.

After qualifying as a doctor in 1934 and serving in the Royal Army Medical Corps in India during World War II, Jerry became Director of the newly-established MRC Social Medicine Research Unit in 1948. He led the unit for 27 years until his retirement (and the unit's closure) in 1975.

Jerry was an epidemiologist, which meant he looked at patterns of disease in the population, and what factors might have affected why some people got sick and others did not. Epidemiology had a long history of use in studying the spread of infections, but Jerry saw that it could be used to study other types of disease as well, an approach that was not well-established and needed a champion to get it accepted by the scientific community. In the 1940s and 50s, Jerry published a number of papers that set out the potential for epidemiological research, pioneering its use in a range of areas of medicine and public health.

But the best arguments for his work were the results it generated. In a series of research papers, including landmark publications in *The Lancet* in 1953 and the *British Medical Journal* in 1958, Jerry showed conclusively that exercise and physical activity were critical factors in reducing the risk of heart disease.


While most people today know that exercise is good for the heart and health in general, before 1945 the link had not been made. After the war, cases of heart disease were rising and no one knew why. By looking at records of heart disease in men and women with various occupations, Jerry found that people with less active jobs were more likely to suffer heart problems.

In particular, he found that bus drivers had a higher risk of having a heart attack than the conductors who worked with them. This was important as the two groups were likely to be from very similar backgrounds, so any differences would be down to their behaviour and not social environment. Bus conductors would generally walk up and down hundreds of steps every day, whereas the drivers would be sitting in their seats for hours at a time.

Jerry went on to demonstrate similar differences in risk of various types of heart disease between other groups of workers. It became clear that the growth in sedentary office jobs was fuelling the rise of heart disease, which has since become the biggest cause of death in the UK.

In 1996, the first IOC Olympic Prize in sport science was awarded to

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Jerry and Dr Ralph S Paffenbarger Jr, who had done similar studies of longshoremen in Los Angeles, for their work demonstrating the relationship between physical activity and the prevention of coronary heart disease. The award included an Olympic medal which was presented at the opening ceremony of the summer games in Atlanta.


Jerry grew up in Glasgow and always remembered the poverty he experienced around him in the city. Determined to help tackle inequalities in health, he had worked with the Government in the 1960s to develop the role of the community physician as a key element in the National Health Service, and served on the expert Working Group chaired by Sir Douglas Black that led to the influential Black Report into health inequality in Britain, published in 1980.

Throughout his life, Jerry continued to work with and lobby politicians, always trying to help more people live longer, healthier lives by building exercise into their daily routine just as he did – jogging, swimming and cycling well into his nineties.

Jerry, whose wife Galia died in 1997, is survived by his two children, two grandchildren and one great-granddaughter.

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See also:

- > [Obituary in the New York Times](#) 
- > [Profile of Prof Morris published in the Financial Times in September 2009](#) 