

# Obituary

## Ruth Freeman 1954 – 2021

One of our dearest friends and colleagues, Ruth Freeman, has died at the age of 67. Ruth qualified with her Bachelor in Dental Surgery from The Queen's University of Belfast in 1979. She then went on to study for her PhD under the supervision of Professor Neil Swallow where she began to develop a keen interest in preventive dentistry. This led to her attendance at University College London in 1983 where she received a Master of Science studying Dental Public Health with Aubrey Sheiham.

Ruth worked at The Queen's University of Belfast as a Lecturer in Dental Public Health where she developed her own very specific interest in behavioural science in dentistry. She had a keen interest in dental anxiety, children's oral health, child dental attendance and dentists' intentions to treat hard to reach groups of patients. Ruth's early work at Queen's was informed by developments in behavioural science, but more enthusiastically and with greater conviction due to her in-depth work with patients by her growing interest in psychoanalytic theory. She also pioneered the use of grounded theory methodology in dentistry at this time working closely with her friend and colleague Professor Richard Ekins from the University of Ulster.

Ruth's early interest in Psychoanalytic Theory and practice arose from continual discussions with her father, Thomas Freeman, a world renowned psychoanalyst. She would later become a fully qualified Psychoanalytical Psychotherapist and member of the British Psychoanalytical Council (BPC). She employed this approach in therapeutic sessions to treat patients with a range of conditions including body dysmorphism, burning mouth and dental phobia. Her active interest in the BPS was reflected in frequent attendance at their North-Eastern meetings with dear friends and colleagues including Kenneth Robinson who spoke at the celebration of her life in Arbroath, Scotland.

Ruth co-edited two books in psychoanalytic theory with Richard Ekins. The *Selected Writings of Anna Freud* remains a widely renowned collection published by Penguin, now in its second press. *Centres and Peripheries of Psychoanalysis: an Introduction* (1994, and ebook version 2018) focused on her father's theoretical approach. Many of the ideas in these books informed her understanding of the dentist-patient relationship which was also published in a series of articles for the British Dental Journal. In these articles she was using archetypes inspired by her interests in Freudian psychoanalysis. Other books included one published by Oxford University Press with Trevor Burke: *Preparing for Dental Practice* (2004) and a Quintessence publication with Gerry Humphris on *Communication in General Practice* (2006).

With her move to the Dental Health Services Research Unit at Dundee Ruth became very adept at working with the Scottish Government and Third Sector organisations. Her close collaborations with a large team of colleagues and students on a programme of work that became very much focused on the oral health of marginalised groups. She published papers and numerous reports on the oral health of homeless people, improving child registrations at dental clinics as well as the oral health of prisoners in Scotland. The reports of her team are widely used to improve services for homeless populations and young offenders and adults in the prison population. It was in conducting this research that Ruth developed the theoretical framework of 'inclusion oral health' along with colleagues from University College London, McGill University Canada and Queen Mary University of London. A framework that has very quickly garnered influence in dental public health.

This is yet again an indication of how Ruth was always ahead of her time. She had conducted research with children as active participants before this approach became widely recognised in dentistry. She understood the central importance of the dentist patient-relationship to dental attendance as well as outcomes and applied her own relational archetypes influenced by psychoanalytic theory, often drawing on her experience as a psychotherapist to inform her research. Likewise, she understood the centrality of bringing new approaches and methods to dentistry, her use of grounded theory being an important case in point. Many of Ruth's numerous higher degree students have made it known how they were inspired and drawn into dental public health. They found her support and confidence building in the talents she recognised in themselves was the trigger to pursue their chosen branch of this specialty. It is this activity for which Ruth will be fondly and prominently remembered.

Ruth disliked pomposity and the seeking of high status. She was a Board Member of the UK Public Health Register and recently resigned due to her retirement 31st August 2021 (barely 3 weeks before her death). She recognised that the work and the people we serve are far more important than our own recognition for doing the work. It is for this reason that Ruth never really sought outward recognition for her achievements. She was one of the funniest but at the same time humblest of people. She will be sorely missed by her many friends, students and colleagues. But rest assured her influence over aspects of social and behavioural sciences in dentistry will steadfastly remain.

She held her Emeritus position at the University of Dundee and visiting Professorships at Central South and Nanjing Universities, China. She leaves a brother: Robert Freeman, and Gerry Humphris her husband.

