

Clive Smee obituary

Economic adviser to the Department of Health who was the first to rigorously assess the cost-effectiveness of NHS treatments

Monday February 10 2020, 12.01am, The Times



Clive Smee was called BFG by his children's friends because of his height and smile

In January 2000, after weeks of dire headlines about the state of the NHS, Tony Blair, the prime minister, appeared on *Breakfast with Frost*. He stunned pretty much everyone — including his chancellor, Gordon Brown, who complained, “You’ve stolen my f***ing budget” — by announcing that, all things being equal, Labour would get NHS expenditure up to the EU average over the next five years.

The commitment was enormous, about 2 percentage points of GDP; the question was precisely how much it would cost, and was it even achievable? On a Sunday morning Clive Smee, the chief economic adviser to the Department of Health, was about the only person outside a shocked Treasury with the international spending data to hand. A panic-stricken phone call to his home from No 10 followed.

As Smee worked out the numbers for what became dubbed “the most expensive breakfast in history” he later recalled, in characteristic self-effacing style, that most of the more complicated calculations were done by his daughter Anna’s boyfriend Jamie, now her husband, because only he knew how to work the compound-interest function on his calculator.

By then Smee had been in the job for 16 years. One of his earliest actions, in 1985, had been to commission two external studies. The first, into the heart-transplant programme, which was still controversial then, concluded that despite the high cost, heart transplants may indeed be cost-effective. The second used international evidence to make the case for the national breast-cancer screening programme that followed. Both had a direct impact on policy and saved many lives.

At the time the application of economics to health was still in its relative infancy. But those two breakthrough studies were the start of almost two decades during which Smee played two key roles: helping to develop the economic evaluation of health and health services; and injecting the findings of that, and of operational research, into government decisions.

Smee's work, and that of the team of analysts he built, did much to ensure that — as long as ministers, policy officials and managers were willing to listen — the NHS would spend its money to best effect. As such, many people who have never heard of him owe the quality of their life to his efforts.

Born in 1942, the son of Victor, a greengrocer, and Leila (née Harrod), a nurse, Clive Harrod Smee benefited greatly from the post-1945 welfare state that he admired. A peripatetic childhood led to grammar school in Guildford, where he was a fine athlete, but not much of an academic star, apart from being not bad at maths. Until that is, a history teacher suggested that, if Clive did the work in his own time, he would help him to do the economics A-level that the school did not usually provide. The result was that Smee became, with his twin sister Penny, who went on to be a missionary in Taiwan, the first of the family to go to university.

At the London School of Economics an American tutor encouraged him to take an MBA at a time when the UK had yet to develop such courses. Smee chose the University of Indiana rather than the cushier east coast, to see a less varnished America. He made lifelong friendships at the university, including with the university's beauty queen, and witnessed the impact of Kennedy's assassination on the country.

Standing at 6ft 4in, Smee was a fine triple-jumper, on one occasion in 1961 losing only to a future Olympic champion. His height and his fetching smile leant him a gravitas that he was nevertheless reluctant to capitalise on. It is therefore no surprise that he became known among his children's friends as the BFG — the Big Friendly Giant. Those traits, plus a good brain, a quizzically dry sense of humour and the ability to explain clearly, were later to help him to steer the eight health secretaries for whom he worked towards the right decisions and away from the worst. He did so without making them feel patronised — an essential skill of any effective civil servant.

His first job was for the British Council in Nigeria during the country's civil war, studying development economics while working alongside Voluntary Services Overseas (VSO), before joining the Ministry of Overseas Development in 1969. It was during that time that he met Denise Sell, a Barnsley-born graduate of Newcastle University in maths and physics, who became a computer programmer and later a maths teacher. She was working for VSO. A question she asked at a development aid conference led to dinner, marriage in 1975, and a 45-year relationship that included much international travel, some work-related and some not, plus much energetic walking and cycling, and deep involvement in charity and community work from their Surrey homes. They had three children: Anna, a charity chief executive; David, a maths teacher; and Elizabeth, an anaesthetist. All survive him.

A seven-year stint in the Department of Health and Social Security fed the interest in health that his study of development economics had instilled. That was followed by work for the Central Policy Review Staff in No 10 under Margaret Thatcher — the first proper central government policy unit — and a spell at the Treasury. These experiences at the centre of government taught him that the effort to turn accurate research into sound policy is largely a networking exercise.

It was, however, his 18 years as chief economic adviser at the Department of Health from 1984 that made the real mark. He is credited by ministers with assembling the evidence that led to the progressive ban on tobacco advertising. A study trip to the US, Australia, Canada and New Zealand in 1996 led him to warn that the UK was off the pace in evaluating the cost-effectiveness of pharmaceuticals. That was his initial contribution to what became the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, which helps to decide what the NHS should — and should not — fund. In the early 2000s he produced an inquiry showing that the service had been closing too many beds too fast, and needed more.

It was far from plain sailing. There were occasions when ministers, policy officials and the influx of NHS managers into the department did not want to hear about hard evidence that might cast doubt on their ideas.

He had an almost painful honesty. One of the hallmarks of *Speaking Truth to Power*, his account for the Nuffield Trust of his time at the Department of Health, is that it contains a genuine dose of self-criticism for things he missed, and records not just the successes but the failures. He blamed himself for failing to persuade Kenneth Clarke, one of the outstanding health secretaries, to fund any proper evaluation, let alone any pilot schemes, of the controversial introduction of more market-like forces into the NHS in 1991.

Smee wrote in his 2005 memoir that the battle inside the department to assess costs, and to evaluate policies once implemented, is one “that has to be continually refought. But today it would be a brave or foolhardy policy lead who would put forward a major policy proposal without any reference to cost-effectiveness.”

Clive Smee CB, economic adviser to the Department of Health, was born on April 29, 1942. He died of motor neurone disease on December 26, 2019, aged 77