

My former colleague and good friend Helen Nicolson, who has died aged 97, was a child psychiatrist, skilled at helping children to express their anxieties and fears.

Helen's calm, interested listening demeanour and her unshaken belief in the worth of children gave great help to many. She could interpret actions and pinpoint family dynamics; she had a clear eye for picking up the nub of problems, which frequently did not lie with the children – they were often played out by other family members.

Born in India, in the Himalayan foothills, to William Mathewson, an eye surgeon and missionary, and his wife, Gwendolen (nee Barbour), Helen had good memories of life there.

She went to the UK aged 10, first living with cousins in Manchester and the next year moving to Edinburgh when her family returned. There she attended St Denis' school, which was evacuated to Drumlanrig Castle in Dumfriesshire, and of which she became head girl.

Then she studied medicine at St Andrews University, and in Manchester and Aberdeen, graduating in 1948. Particularly concerned with relationships and family influences, she trained in the new discipline of child psychiatry at Newcastle under Professor Donald Court, a Quaker.

In 1965 Helen was appointed a consultant in Dundee, in its newly founded department of child and family psychiatry. One of two consultants in the discipline, she worked between Dundee Royal Infirmary, Liff hospital, where there was a small in-patient unit, and Perth Royal Infirmary. Later an in-patient service was set up for adolescents.

Her approach was psychodynamic: listening to the stories told and helping children to express their anxieties, often non-verbally. The registrars, social workers, psychologists and occupational therapist in the team had their own parts to play in interpreting, supporting and helping to evolve a way forward for a child and their family, who were living with behaviours they could not understand or control.

Helen had a prodigious memory, which enabled her to recall family histories, different theoretical approaches, academic papers and statements made in the team meetings. She trained many junior doctors who rotated through the unit, expecting, and receiving, high standards.

In 1976 Helen married Tom Nicolson, an academic botanist and Shetlander with two children; in the early 1980s she retired and they moved to Shetland. Helen frequently travelled with Tom to conferences across the world, and took a great interest in his work. After his death in 2005 she moved back to Perth.

Her contacts with the Religious Society of Friends led her to becoming a Quaker, and her membership was an important aspect of her life thereafter. Living fairly quietly, she had an active mind up to the end, and always had a newspaper or library book beside her.

She is survived by her stepdaughter, Susie, and step-grandson, Mathew.

Source: [Helen Nicolson obituary](#)