

## Remembering Margaretha Nilsson PhD (1937-2017)



*Photo: Margaretha Nilsson in 1989*

Adviser and Trustee of Community Hygiene Concern 1988-2017

Margaretha Nilsson, a Swedish parasitologist, based at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, and Joanna Ibarra, met at the School in 1982. Joanna's 1979 - 1982 campaign to solve the increasing problem of head lice in schoolchildren and their families had brought her into discussion with leading authorities on the subject, John Maunder and Paddy Donaldson, both working at the School at that time. Joanna raised grant funding from the Department of Health to establish the Human Louse Control Management courses to be tutored by John, with Paddy and other specialists as guest speakers. Maunder asked Joanna to take on the course organisation on behalf of the skin entomology unit he set up at the School. Margaretha, a research fellow at the School, and pre-eminently a teacher, took an enthusiastic interest in the course development and attended the first one. Whilst always appreciative of John's outstanding teaching ability, she had a keen eye for any unsubstantiated theories he presented.

Thus, she agreed with Maunder's reservation of the term 'nit' for the empty eggshell, as a helpful differentiation. He presented carefully argued grounds for this, pointing to the fact that the eggshell turns whiter once the louse has hatched, and as it remains stuck firmly on the hair, it acts as a very successful detraction from the living lice. Margaretha shared Maunder's derision of headlines such as "The nits are

on the march” because it is only the louse stage which moves between heads. However, she questioned his support of jingles such as “Break their legs and they can’t lay eggs” and “A legless louse is an eggless louse” because Maunder could not demonstrate a causal link between the two processes.<sup>1</sup>

Margaretha demanded adherence to rigorous scientific standards, with arguments clearly presented in good English. She also gave credit where she saw it was due, and both she and Joanna were very upset to learn of Maunder’s death in 2009, 2 years after the event, because no seemingly obituary acknowledging his contribution to louse control appeared at the time.

Joanna Ibarra ceased working with John Maunder in 1986 in order to study at the University of East London. In 1988 she founded the charity Community Hygiene Concern (CHC) “to protect people and pets from common UK parasites”. The Rector of the University, Gerry Fowler, and Prof Keith Snow, Joanna’s specialist tutor, became the first presidents, and Margaretha became a long-standing and highly valued member of the charity’s board of Trustees. She was particularly supportive of CHC’s work on separate specialised combs for the easy detection and removal of head lice on the one hand, and for nit removal on the other hand. Margaretha applauded the high standard of the charity’s illustrated educational materials.

Forthright in her opinions, sometimes highly critical, Margaretha shunned the limelight, but nevertheless was a catalyst for positive change, and was inspirational to anyone who came into contact with her. Alerted to new studies showing that silicone-based cyclic compounds, found in some modern treatments for head lice, are linked with adverse effects on the liver and fertility, Margaretha’s abiding ambition was to work to safeguard the public health by raising regulatory standards.<sup>2,3</sup>

Stubborn, fiercely independent, honest, contrary, pioneering, she was Margaretha. We will not forget someone who gave us so much to remember.

## FOOTNOTES

1. Maunder argued “One of the most effective weapons ever devised against lice is the ordinary pocket comb” on the premise that “the head louse’s only defence against the scratching finger is to hold on tight to up to six strands of hair, doing its best to avoid being dislodged...this tight grip increases the chances of having one or more legs pulled off instead”...“a five-legged louse will always die” (quotes from the famous Maunder lecture ‘The Appreciation of Lice’ 1982). Maunder never published any studies proving his theory was correct.
2. MN participated in discussions on CHC’s presentation on [raising regulatory standards to the International Congress on Phthiraptera, Buenos Aires, 2006](#)
3. In 2021 CHC described the ongoing work to remove silicone-based cyclic compounds from toiletries and treatments for head lice in their annual return to the Charity Commission – [see Report here](#), [with attachment here](#): NGO ERASE TOXINE – HEAL (2021) Under the Label: The story behind chemicals in cosmetics

