



FELLOWSHIP OF THE UNIVERSITY
HONORIS CAUSA

PROFESSOR EUGENE MICHAEL
GERARD MILNE MBE

2 MAY 2024

PROFESSOR EUGENE MICHAEL GERARD MILNE:
HONORARY FELLOWSHIP

Chancellor Dharker, members of the University, distinguished alumni, and honoured guests,

When people tell you the person you are researching is, “awesome” and “one in a million”, you immediately start to wonder how on earth you are going to capture all that talent in a thousand words. Thus, it is with some trepidation that I begin my citation for Emeritus Professor Eugene Milne.

Eugene is perhaps best known as the former Director of Public Health for Newcastle, a role he fulfilled with distinction from 2014-2022.

He held this post during one of the most challenging periods in recent history; the Covid pandemic. Reflecting on this difficult time, Pat Ritchie, CBE, who was then Chief Executive of the City Council, told me how much she had appreciated Eugene’s leadership and epidemiological expertise as well as his compassion for everyone affected by the virus. Pat describes Eugene as a “somewhat reluctant media star,” who rapidly became seen as a trusted adviser to both the regional media and general public, “often accompanied by his famous graphs.”

PROFESSOR EUGENE MICHAEL GERARD MILNE:
HONORARY FELLOWSHIP

Many of his presentations were delivered from his attic in Gosforth, via Microsoft Teams, and Pat tells me that she and her colleagues were, “pleased to see that as the pandemic eased, he was allowed downstairs to a much nicer room that looked like a library!”

Born in Hull in 1960, Eugene is the second eldest of five children. There were no medics in his immediate family, but he had an Auntie who was an Army Nurse, and recalls her having lots of interesting postings abroad. He loved sciences at school and having decided to study Medicine at University, Newcastle wasn't initially on his radar. However, after attending an open day with a friend, he knew this was where he wanted to come. Eugene loved his time at Newcastle and fully immersed himself in student life. Highlights included a stint as editor of the student newspaper, The Courier and co-writing the Medical Review for his year. It was at Newcastle that he met his wife, Debra, and we are delighted that she is here with him this evening. Debra thinks they first met at Med Soc and recalls that they were also in a really bad band together. It was so dreadful, they only had one gig before disbanding. Despite this potentially rocky start, they bonded over a shared love of music and now have three sons, Oliver, Sam, and Gabriel, all of whom are incredibly proud of what Eugene has achieved.

PROFESSOR EUGENE MICHAEL GERARD MILNE:
HONORARY FELLOWSHIP

Eugene himself is talented musician who plays multiple instruments, including viola, violin, guitar, mandolin, and banjo. His tastes in music are broad, embracing pop and indie bands, prog rock, and jazz. I'm told one of his favourite bands is Snarky Puppy, whom I confess I'd never heard of, but thanks to the extensive playlists maintained by my family, I now know that they are distinctive, but hard to categorise, and embrace jazz, rock, world music and funk. Thank you for widening my musical horizons!

After graduating, Eugene was initially drawn to paediatrics and completed a succession of roles with distinguished Newcastle medics, including Professor Sir Al Aynsley-Green and Professor Sir Alan Craft. It was whilst working as a Registrar in Paediatric Oncology under Alan Craft, that Eugene met Martin White, then a Registrar in Public Health, and this ultimately led to his decision to switch specialisms.

He was offered his initial traineeship in Public Health by our former Chancellor, Professor Sir Liam Donaldson, who was then Regional Director of Public Health. Sir Liam tells me he is very proud to have helped Eugene secure his first role in Public Health and considers him to be "one of the most talented and highly regarded public health leaders of his generation".

PROFESSOR EUGENE MICHAEL GERARD MILNE:
HONORARY FELLOWSHIP

He went on to describe Eugene as, “the go-to person for many people with a problem to resolve or a complex question that no-one else could answer.”

This talent for problem solving was also highlighted to me by Eugene’s friend and colleague, Jim McManus, the National Director of Health, and Wellbeing for Public Health Wales, who, when faced with a particularly thorny challenge, told me he invariably starts by asking himself, “What would Eugene do?.”

Throughout his career in Public Health, Eugene has worked to tackle inequalities in health, and sadly, the North-East has many pressing health-related issues to address.

The Baby Clear campaign, which he led, encouraged midwives to work with pregnant mothers who smoked and get them to take smoking cessation seriously. He also initiated projects such as Balance, which focussed on helping reduce alcohol consumption. One of his most impactful projects was Fresh, which was established in 2005 with the aim of reducing smoking rates in adults. At the time, the North-East had the worst rate of smoking related illness and death in England. Between 2005 and 2022, smoking rates in the region dropped from 29% of adults to 13.1%.

PROFESSOR EUGENE MICHAEL GERARD MILNE:
HONORARY FELLOWSHIP

The Fresh programme was recognised as a model for regional tobacco control, and in 2009, was awarded the Chief Medical Officer's Gold Medal, followed by the Irish Cancer Society's Charles Cully Medal in 2012. It is typical of Eugene's generous and collaborative nature that he asked for the medal to be awarded to the team that delivered this programme, not just himself.

Since undertaking a BMedSci during his undergraduate studies, Eugene has always had a strong interest in research. He is, according to Jim McManus, someone who thinks deeply, analyses carefully and then comes up with answers. This resonates with an observation made by Professor Ashley Adamson, who told me that one of Eugene's many strengths was that he brought academic rigour to public health practice. So, when an opportunity arose for the University to bid for funding to establish Fuse - The Centre for Excellence for Translational Research in Public Health, Eugene was the ideal person to bring on board. Established in 2008, Fuse is a partnership across all five North East Universities and public health practice, led by Newcastle University. In the beginning, there were some who doubted whether a collaboration between local government and five different Universities would work, but it does, and has gone from strength to strength. Since its inception, Fuse has brought more than £200m of research grants to the region.

PROFESSOR EUGENE MICHAEL GERARD MILNE:
HONORARY FELLOWSHIP

Eugene has shaped and contributed to its success from the outset, serving as Vice-Chair of Fuse Strategy Board and on the Advisory Board of the School for Public Health Research. Between 2017 and 2022, Eugene was a Visiting Professor in our Population Health Sciences Institute and is now an Emeritus Professor.

Eugene's many achievements have been recognised with numerous awards and prizes, including the Faculty of Public Health's Alwyn Smith Memorial Prize, which he was awarded in 2022 for his outstanding contribution to Public Health. The Faculty of Public Health also honoured his achievements as editor of the Journal of Public Health between 2014/2019 and awarded him a President's Medal for Outstanding Service to Public Health during the pandemic. In December 2022, he was awarded an MBE for services to Public Health and Wellbeing.

PROFESSOR EUGENE MICHAEL GERARD MILNE:
HONORARY FELLOWSHIP

Chancellor Dharker, Eugene Milne is a distinguished alumnus of this University, who exemplifies the very best of what public health is and should be. Throughout his career, his work has aligned with the values and guiding principles we hold dear – visibly leading, working together, responding to current and future challenges.

I am proud and honoured to present to you, Emeritus Professor Eugene Michael Gerard Milne, MBE, to be accepted into the fellowship of Newcastle University.

Citation by Jill Taylor-Roe

Senior Public Orator

2nd May 2024