



## **Diverse perspectives on health and illness**

*Frank Richards*

### **Presenter**

Frank Richards was born in Barbados in 1931. Faced with unemployment throughout the Caribbean, he came to Britain in 1955.

### **Frank Richards**

I remember clearly now, the very day that we went to the airport you know, and my aunt, and my aunt's husband was there, and you know, and it really did hurt me very much when I said goodbye to them all and turned around, and walked away from them. and when I was going on the plane, I paused and I looked back, and I can hardly express in words how sad I felt you know. and right there in my mind, I wondered well what would the future be, how would I cope in a strange country? And, when I say strange, not that Britain was strange to us because being part of the British Empire, and we were taught quite a lot about the history and the geography of the British isles, and the whole of the British Empire, and although in a way I didn't feel like I was coming to a strange land yet, the thought of coming into a different environment, it had me somewhat worried. and I was thinking all the time, when the plane took off from the airport, I was think well, how am I going to cope with the future? It was really sad leaving, and it took me a long time to get over it. I was very much attached to the church, all my life so far really, and that's one thing that they always said to me, 'because you're leaving, don't give up your church. You be sure that you hold onto it', and I find that very comforting.

### **Presenter**

He went to a hostel in Bath, and got a job working on the presses in an engineering firm.

### **Frank Richards**

I settled down in the job quite well really. I think I was a bit surprised myself, because I thought it would have taken me a long time, to get used to the surroundings, but within a few weeks, I started to feel quite at home really, and some of the chaps were very friendly and nice you know and, they tried to make me feel at home but, there were those who were rather hostile and weren't so friendly to people like myself, you know. But nevertheless, I got on quite well with most of the chaps, and the foreman was very helpful too you know. Because he told me himself one day you know, you will meet some opposition from some of the chaps, but don't let it get you down you know. All you've got to do, you do your job, try not to break the rules of the company, and behave yourself, and you won't have any trouble. So that's just what I did.

I myself didn't realise it was so difficult to get accommodation, after having lived in a hostel for a for a little time, and of course, there were times that, we would go, not only myself, but others would go to places where we saw signs up, you know, vacancies, and sometimes they would turn you away, or maybe if it's a lady, come to the door very often, she would look at you and say, 'oh I've got no vacancies' and bang the door had slammed shut you know. and, lots of people used to do that.

### **Presenter**

Frank found a room with a Polish family, and lived there until he met his wife. Though now divorced, they have two children.

### **Frank Richards**

I came to Birmingham, and I worked for British Rail, because it was so easy in those days to get a job, getting a job was no problem what so ever, and I was always fascinated by trains, seeing photographs of them and so on, and I went down to the recruiting office, and I went and saw the personnel manager there, and he said 'Well, we're badly short of signalmen,

would you be interested in being trained as a signalman?' I said 'Well I've got no idea what the job entails'. He said 'don't you worry we'll train you, and see how you get on'.

**Presenter**

Despite the low pay, he found a lot of enjoyment in being a signalman.

**Frank Richards**

Well, in a way, it was the independence, you know, I was more or less my own boss, you know and I, was the one who made the decision to run the trains and so on and, it was, thrilling to be able to do that you know, and it, more or less I saw it as, it gave me a sense of achievement you know. I thought well, here I was, coming from the Caribbean, not having a clue about railways or anything like it, and yet I seem to have settled down so well in the job, and was enjoying it too.

**Presenter**

Frank, his wife, and by now their baby son, were still living in one room. Finding a bigger place proved very difficult. Was that discrimination?

**Frank Richards**

Yes it was, because I found this out, a solicitor who had told me there was a gentleman he knew, the gentleman lived in Brownhills, but his daughter used to look after the home he had in Hansworth, she had a flat on the ground floor for herself, and she used to look after the house, and rent it out in flats. And he told me, that he would give me a letter to take to the gentleman, and he would be able to supply me with a flat. It so happened I did get the letter to him, and he said 'okay yes, yes we got rooms vacant at the moment', then he told me where the flat was, and I went there in the morning, I rang the bell, and I waited for some time, I rang it a second time. While standing at the front, I look, and I saw the curtain move very slightly you know. I couldn't see the person's whole face, I just had a glimpse of the person, and it, was pushed back quickly. You know, I thought 'that's funny'.

Anyhow I continued to stand there, I thought probably she wanted to see how it was. Well I waited for some time after. I pressed the bell again and nothing happened, but I listened, and I heard a click on the door, and I thought she was about to open it, and nothing happened, I thought 'that's odd'. Anyhow, I got fed up standing there. So I walked back, a little way down the road where there was a telephone kiosk, and I phoned up the father, and he said to me, 'well I didn't want to tell you, but my daughter doesn't fancy renting any of the rooms or the flats to coloured people'. He said 'I didn't want to tell you this because, I didn't want to upset you, but as far as I'm concerned you could have it'. But he said, 'My daughter, she looks after the house, so I can't go above her head, and, offer it to you. I can't do that I'm sorry but. If I can help you in any other way, you know, and I know of anywhere, where you can get a flat or a room, I'll gladly recommend you you know.' Well I thanked him very much, and that was the end of that.

It wasn't the sort of thing I expected. Now if it were in the United States or South Africa or some country like that, I wouldn't have been surprised, but I didn't think it happened in Britain. It took me by surprise, it did indeed yes, I was shocked really. Then nevertheless, as time went on, things got better and people were more understanding, and we didn't have this opposition, and then, more people began to rent flats and, and rooms to people from the Caribbean and Asians and so on, and it made life much more tolerable you know. But it was very very difficult at the time really you know it's terribly difficult.

There was a great deal of it at work too, especially in the early fifties when people started coming over here. You know, sometimes, many of the chaps that work there, they would shun you, you know, because they thought well, you shouldn't be here, or you shouldn't be working for wages like they are, and that some of them weren't too friendly at all. They never made you feel welcome. Although others were completely the opposite, others were very friendly very helpful, and they did everything, thing to make you feel at home, especially when you were new on the job, they would tell you various things about the work and, what to do and how to tackle certain problems and so on and, this I found very helpful. That's human nature of course, if some people are that way inclined, well you can't do a lot, lot about it, you've just got to put up with it as best you can really and learn to cope.

**Presenter**

In 1962, Frank Richards bought the house he lives in today. Over twenty years later, he was still working for British rail, when his health started to cause concern.

### **Frank Richards**

I had a long spell in 1983 especially, I started feeling very ill, and I was attending, and getting medication from my GP for for a long time. But my condition wasn't improving, I was still having problems. I remember one morning when I should have booked on duty at 4:25, I collapsed, I couldn't get out of bed. and of course after a few hours, I didn't feel any better so, they rang for the doctor for me, and, he came and checked me out, and he said 'I think you've had a mild stroke, so the best thing to do, I'll I'm going to get you off to hospital'. That's where they took me then, and they checked me through, and two of the doctors they confirm, that I did have a mild stroke. But strangely enough, I remember on the Friday afternoon, I found out that, all along my left side, was beginning to get rather sluggish, I wasn't moving my leg or my arm so freely, and I thought it was muscular trouble, and I said to myself, 'oh well by Monday it'll be all cleared up I'll be alright'. But that's what happened, I just couldn't get out of bed. Anyhow, they decided, they would keep me in, and do further tests to find out what had caused it, and they found out that my blood pressure was extremely high, and they also, found out that I had diabetes as well, in a mild form. They kept me in for another week, and sent me home, and then I had to go back in the following week. They wanted to put me through some more tests, and they found out then, that I had a serious liver complaint.

### **Presenter**

Frank's liver continued to deteriorate, and there were other problems.

### **Frank Richards**

They were giving me a scan one day, and they found out that I had a growth next to my bladder, and of course, it was giving me a lot of trouble because, I was having difficulty in passing water now, so they said well, they'll have to remove it. And I had an operation to have that removed then, and that set me back some more. All this time they were treating me for my liver, and then of course, my situation with the diabetes got worse, so that caused more problems. Up went my blood pressure again, and, it was one thing after another. So I, I thought to myself 'that it does seem as if I'm getting ready for the scrap heap!' Then I was re-admitted to Dudley road hospital again, and the consultant saw me one morning, and he told me that, he said well 'Frank, I've got some news for you, but I'm afraid it's bad news'. I said 'well what is it?' He said 'Well, I'm afraid your liver has reached the stage now where, you'll never get better. You're not responding to the treatment', and he said, 'the only thing, will save you, is to have a transplant.' He said 'if you don't, you will live very much longer'. So he said 'well, what I'll do, i'll give you a little time to think about it, when I come to see you on Monday morning, do let me know how you feel about it'. So, he came, it was some time about ten o'clock I think on the Monday morning, and he said 'well how are you?' I said 'Well, I don't feel too badly this morning' and he said 'well, have you been thinking of what I told you last week?' I said 'yes I've, given it serious thought.' He said well, what's your decision, I said well, I will have it. He said 'that's good, that's good news, I'm pleased that you have decided to have it'. He said 'Look, I must tell you though that, we still can't guarantee that you will live, even if you get it you might still die. But if you don't, you really won't survive much longer. So it's essential that you have it for survival.'

### **Presenter**

The transplant was successful, and with his family's support, he's made a good recovery. But it's affected the way he feels about himself and his life.

### **Frank Richards**

Well, I've spent a lot of time looking back over my previous life, and it brought me face-to-face with myself really, and I realised, that, the chances are, that my time here on earth wasn't very much longer. and I had more or less resigned myself to it. I thought 'well, if it be goes well that I survive, I'm thankful. If I die, I'm thankful just the same, because it's part of life, that we've got to face up to death really'. We're walking and moving around, and carrying on with our daily lives, but the time comes, when it will stop, and I was quite prepared to face up to it. I haven't at the moment got the strength, and I haven't got the means, even though I would be able to find the time, but I think my main concern would be, I wish that, in times past, years

ago, that I had done more for people. I could have done a lot more than I have done, and that's the one regret I have. Although now, if anyone appeals to me for help, even if I don't know that person, I would never turn my back on anyone. But I suppose that, when one is young you usually think more of enjoyment and, all the excitement that you get off of life, but I wish I could have done a lot more.

I realise, the older I get, I that I've got many faults really, and, I think it's done a lot of good to me in a way, yes. It's made me really take an honest look at myself and see well, after all, I'm like anyone else I have my weaknesses and so on and, I'm quite honest about it, yes. It's made me take an, a really good look at myself. I'd had to give up work, because British Rail wouldn't, under any circumstances keep me on the job with my condition, you know, so I had to accept really retirement. But I'm thankful that I'm well enough at this time, to do what I always wanted to do, that's why I decided to take up theology, with the school of continuing studies now, Birmingham University, and, all the studies, and the preparation and so on, is done by the university. We have their lecturers as well, and we've got, an excellent group of tutors really. They're very very good indeed, and I find even though I have stopped studying for so many years, I've settled down to it quite well, and I'm enjoying it really, it's great. I very often look forward to the time when I've have to go to lessons, because it's, I find it stimulating, and it's a form of therapy in itself. It's helping me to recover and to really get back to normal life.

**Presenter**

Does he have any thoughts now about going back to Barbados?

**Frank Richards**

Though I still feel that I, I've got ties with the western way of life, at the same time I think I feel as British as anybody else now, after having been here so long you know, and feel quite settled, and if I were to go back now, I'd I'd have to start all over again you know, and it's a quite different way of life and so on. You know, this is a very much faster country and, apart from the weather out there, you know I think I would miss a lot of things here really. and what I'm thinking now, is in terms of illness, if you become ill, you know you can get the treatment and, whereas in most other countries in the world you've got to pay for it, and if you can't pay well, you go without and, that could have very serious results. But I think on the whole I'm not afraid of reaching advanced age here at all, I'm not afraid of it.

**Presenter**

Frank's spiritual beliefs have played a major role in his life.

**Frank Richards**

When I, when I was young, of course, I was very keen on getting involved in church work, playing a really important role in it. When I say important, not from myself but, from what I could give to others you know. I used to sit here many a day, when I first came out of hospital, and I often thought well, when I get well enough, although I felt at the time, it would take me a very, very long time to be able to get around and walk easily and so on. and I always thought well, what could I possibly do now to fill in my time, and to be useful, instead of just sitting, doing nothing. A friend of mine told me, about this course, and I jumped at it like a flash. I thought, now there's a good opportunity for me to do what I always wanted to do, and there may be a chance for me now, god willing, to achieve what I always wanted to. So that's why I took the chance, and I intend to keep it up really.