

THE BRAIN DONOR

Dr Lorna Wing arranged for her late daughter Suzie's brain to be retrieved and donated for research purposes to the Brain Bank for Autism & Related Development Research, at the John Radcliffe Hospital, Oxford; her late husband, Professor John Wing, left instructions in his Will that his own brain should be donated after he died - and Lorna Wing has arranged that her brain, too, should go to the Brain Bank.

Lorna and her husband met when they were medical students, back in the 1950s. "We both did anatomy, and I met my husband over a dead body," she tells me on the phone, with a soft, light laugh. "We were both assigned the same body. I remember the anatomy room so vividly - and I thought then that I'd be perfectly prepared to donate my own body. It just seemed a nice atmosphere." We both laugh, at the incongruity, but she feels very strongly that learning anatomy, through dissection, is also a very important part of medical training: "It gave us the feeling that we could deal with humans as they really are."

When she was a student there was no shortage of cadavers. "There was no problem in finding bodies for medical students. Most of the bodies came, I think, from patients who had died in long-term care, from homes for the poor or the abandoned."

These days you can donate your own body for medical training and research (see ['The body-donor's story'](#)); "I know an awful lot of people find it repellent, but it's so useful to be able to use the bits and pieces."

Especially the brain.

Lorna, now in her eighties, is well-known and has long been influential in the field of autism research: it was she and her colleague Dr Judith Gould who suggested the idea of an 'autism spectrum', and Lorna has written extensively on the subject. She and Judith Gould also set up the Lorna Wing Centre for Autism in Bromley, Kent, in 1991, under the auspices of the [National Autism Society](#). "I still do occasional sessions there," she tells me, in her warm, soft voice. "We get together and discuss cases with people who are involved in teaching professionals about diagnosis. There are often up to fifteen professional people in the sessions - it's good fun, too!"

But her interest in autism and its underlying causes is not only academic - she has a very personal reason to be involved.

The Wings' daughter, Susan, was born in 1956. "We suspected something was wrong soon after she was born, but she was not diagnosed as autistic until she was three years old. Having Susan was the reason why I went into the field of researching developmental disorders."

Sadly, Suzie had to go into residential care, although she was able to come home to John and Lorna at the weekends.

Then, in 2005, aged 49 years old, Suzie died, of a massive heart attack. "She was one of the quite small proportion of autistic people who drink excessive amounts of fluid, and this had affected her blood chemistry. She died very suddenly. I miss her terribly."

"Because of her sudden death, there was a postmortem - I told the pathologist that I wanted her brain to go to the Brain Bank ... It was helpful, I think, that I

was medically trained - I can imagine that if this had happened to someone who wasn't, they would find it hard to know what to do and who to ask. I got in touch with (Professor) Margaret Esiri at the [Brain Bank in Oxford](#) " Then John Wing died in 2009, leaving Lorna "with no family - only our cat." But she is still actively championing autism research. When she wrote to me previously, she told me, "My hope is to live long enough to see the mystery of the neuropathology underlying autism to be discovered." In a recent letter in the NAS' newsletter, *Communication*, she noted that "the main barrier to developing understanding of autism through research is the lack of donated brain tissue," and she encouraged everyone in the "autism community" to think about and act upon this. And it is worth noting that it is not only brains from people with autism that are needed, but also - to help with comparative studies - brains from people without.

April 2011