

REMEMBERING BARBARA 2/03

Tributes to Barbara Ansell, CBE 1923-2001

Assembled by Pat Woo, Bobbie Jarvis, and Alan Craft

Reprinted in PROJ in 2003 issues with the kind permission of Pat Woo in order to enhance the distribution of these tributes to a wonderful paediatric rheumatologist.

I Gwyneth Llewelyn Priestland Parent of a patient

How traumatized we were when Kate was diagnosed with severe Rheumatoid Arthritis at the age of 13!! –But along came Dr. Barbara Ansell.

What an all-enveloping person! Her patients became part of her family – and she in turn became a good family friend. Everything with her became positive, and even with the gloomiest diagnosis she instilled the feeling that everything was possible. I remember fondly her welcome and her open house at Stoke Poges where I stayed a number of times when my daughter Kate was receiving surgery at hospitals nearby.

She was outstanding in her medical field of excellence, and we as a family are much in her debt. Her sense of humour and infectious smile was something else.

She will be sorely missed.

II Flavio Fantini Rheumatologist from Milan

Like all European doctors involved in paediatric rheumatology, I was bound to encounter Barbara M. Ansell's imposing physical, scientific, and

human personality in the course of my career. With a background in internal medicine and adult rheumatology, I began dealing with arthritic children in distant 1970, when the Istituto Ortopedico Gaetano Pini decided to introduce a section of rheumatology beside the paediatric orthopaedics department, then situated in Via San Luca. Although I had attended the Garmisch-Partenkirchen centre for rheumatic children for a short period in 1972, I was largely self-taught, and I felt a strong urge to improve my knowledge and share my experiences. The occasion for this arose with the memorable workshop on the care of rheumatic children held in Oslo in 1977, where Barbara, with her teacher Bywaters, played a fundamental part.

My relationship with Barbara intensified when, during the XV International Congress of Rheumatology held in Paris in 1981, I was named as the Italian delegate of the standing committee for paediatric rheumatology, of which Barbara was the chairperson. Under her leadership, the committee played an important role in the development of the discipline and in encouraging a constant interchange between its members.

Certainly Barbara, maybe because of her great love for opera, loved Italy, and was always ready to visit us. I had a strong suspicion that she understood Italian perfectly, although I never had the pleasure of hearing her speak my language (except for a few standard expressions mainly dealing with food, such as pasta, parmigiano, barbera, ...). I was greatly honoured when, for the first time, she accepted to take part in a meeting organized by me in Milan: dealing with eye involvement in juvenile chronic arthritis, it took on March 24th 1984. On that occasion, I managed to obtain some tickets for the Scala theatre, I believe for Mozart's "Idomeneo Re di Creta". After this, Barbara often returned to Milan for lectures and congresses. Among other meetings, she took part in the workshop held at the Gaetano Pini institute on February 28th, 1985 on "Disease evaluation for therapeutic protocols in children with chronic arthritis". Unfortunately we did not come to an agreement (maybe the time was not ripe), but the seeds sown on that occasion bore their fruit in 1997, when in Pavia, under the impulse of our local and American colleagues, we defined the core set for the improvement of juvenile arthritis. Barbara also offered her cooperation when I organized a workshop in Milan on April 27th 1990 on the "Indications and side effects of corticosteroid therapy in rheumatic children".

Over the years, a warm friendship developed between Barbara and not only myself, but also my entire family. Barbara always showed strong

affection for my wife Luisa and my children Marina and Paola. Marina, like the children of other colleagues, was Barbara's guest in the summer of 1983, when she also took part in a summer camp organized by Barbara for her British patients.

It is hard to believe that Barbara is gone. For many years, with unchanging enthusiasm and unfailing energy, she was a certain presence at all the main scientific meetings, no matter where in the world they took place. Her capacity for work, her competence, her experience, her attention, her memory were extraordinary until the end.

But besides her value as a professional and a scientist, it was her human characteristics that made her so rare. With her superior intellectual skills, it would have been easy for her to be arrogant; by taking advantage of her experience and fame, she could have easily have become rich; but she seemed to be led mainly by the desire of creating an atmosphere of knowledge, friendship, solidarity, affections. As far as I know, during her long and fruitful career, she received no academic honours, but she was honoured by the love, consideration and respect of many generations of colleagues from every part of the world.

**III Ann Hall
Rheumatologist,
Wexhall Hall, UK**

I remember how good she was at encouraging the youngsters to socialize and every few months or so there would be a party or a barbecue, etc at the hospital or at her home. Similarly, she arranged for the Canadian Mounties to visit the hospital (The Canadian Red Cross) and used funds to buy a minibus to bus kids to the theatre, cinema, and something called the Beaconsfield Fair, which happened once a year and was a great treat.

She sent a huge number of Christmas cards each year to old patients.

Two of her favorite expressions: "never say I can't: and "there is nothing that can't be overcome by hard work".

Her capacity for work was prodigious. After a day starting at 8.00am and finishing at 6.00-6.30pm with no formal breaks for coffee, lunch, or tea, she would dismiss us all “off you go, I’m going to do some real work now”.

At one of the many parties given for her on her retirement, the one at the RSM, Norton Hadler from the States, representing her foreign fellows, introduced a new measurement tool, the Ansell grades 1, 2, and 3:

Grade 1- slight panic during ward rounds

Grade 2- panic during ward rounds

Grade 3- a full blown panic attack at the mention of the name Ansell.

A research fellow from Greece who was in the Greek army referred to his secondment to Taplow as his “NATO exercise”.

Perhaps my favorite story is of Barbara in flight. During an intercontinental flight the steward requested a doctor. Barbara went forward and was shown into the galley where an air hostess who had fainted was just coming around. Her first words on seeing Barbara, “Oh hello Dr. Ansell”. I can’t believe even the Queen would have been so instantly recognized in such circumstances.

IV Kate Llewelyn

A patient

I can thank Barbara Ansell for helping me get to where I am today. She always pushed me to achieve as much as I could and questioned me when I tried to offer excuses for not doing something she knew was within my reach. She really made me feel I could achieve anything I set my mind to. She was right.

When I first went to see her she sent for a number of operations. This was the last thing I felt like at the age of 16, but she instilled a confidence in me which my family and I never lost. Thanks to her getting my body back on track, I was able to continue with my education, go on to higher education and later on to work with the charity Arthritis Care.

When I was promoted to become publications manager and editor of Arthritis News, Barbara sent me a letter of congratulations saying how much she enjoyed reading my work. High praise. I was chuffed.

A truly remarkable woman who I know I will not be alone in missing.