

Contemporary history

Dr Barbara Ansell CBE, MD, FRCP, FRCS

On 30 August 1988 Dr Barbara Ansell retired from National Health Service practice after a distinguished career as a rheumatologist initially at the Canadian Red Cross Memorial Hospital, Taplow and then at the Clinical Research Centre, Northwick Park. There can be few paediatricians in the United Kingdom who have not had direct clinical contact with her over the past 30 years in her capacity as the doyenne of paediatric rheumatology. How then did she come to achieve this unique position?

She was born at home in Warwick in 1923 into a non-medical family and read medicine in Birmingham during the war years where she received a distinction in surgery. Her earliest paediatric influence came when she was a patient in Warwick County Hospital under the care of Wilfrid Gaisford, later to become Professor of Paediatrics in Manchester. House jobs in Birmingham were followed by her only formal paediatric training for two years in Northampton. A further house job under Professor McMichael at the Hammersmith led to the MRCP diploma and a desire to pursue a career in cardiology. Attempts were made to dissuade her from this when told that there was a string of men waiting for posts in cardiology and that as a woman she would be well advised to think of something else (how times have changed?). A year in Chicago with Professor Robert Cark on an Eli Lilly scholarship is remembered as the most academically stimulating of her life and she returned full of enthusiasm. Still keen on pursuing a career in cardiology she was given a post as research fellow at the Canadian Red Cross Memorial Hospital at Taplow where Professor Eric Bywaters wanted her to study the heart disease of rheumatic fever. However, she very quickly became much more interested in the arthritic aspects of rheumatic fever and consequently all forms of arthritis in children.

In 1962 she was appointed consultant in a joint appointment between the NHS and the Medical Research Council a post she held until her retirement. One of her major research interests has been in the classification of arthritis in children and this formed the basis of a thesis for which she was awarded the degree of MD with distinction in 1965. Twenty years later most of the important findings of that work have been shown to be correct and a



greater understanding of disease patterns and prognosis has emerged from her unique experience gained from long term follow up of patients over 20 to 30 years. She has pioneered novel management techniques with a specialised team of physiotherapists, occupational therapists, social workers, orthotists, and orthopaedic surgeons. Those who have worked closely with her have been deeply impressed by a phenomenal ability to remember details of children and their families, by the very practical nature of advice given, and by a gift for making instant friends with children.

Honours have flowed her way. In 1978 she was elected a member of the British Paediatric Association and it was most appropriate that she gave the George Frederic Still Memorial lecture to the annual meeting of the BPA in 1981 on 'Chronic Childhood Arthritis Today'. A CBE in 1982 and an honorary FRCS in 1985 are among many other well deserved honours.

What then are Dr Ansell's main achievements? The Taplow group quite clearly showed that early active management of children with arthritis could lead to significant improvements in outcome. Children from all over the United Kingdom and many other parts of the world, benefited from the high quality inpatient management and supervision of subsequent treatment from her unit. However, it was clear that Taplow would have to close (it was built in 1915 with an estimated life of 10 years!) and Dr Ansell, who always believed that the future lay in good regional services, set about training and influencing paediatricians throughout the country. She inspired the setting up of regional clinics, usually staffed by a paediatrician and rheumatologist, and for the past 10 years she has spent much of her time visiting these centres on a regular basis, ensuring a smooth transition from the centralised care of former years. There are also many countries in the world where there are paediatricians who

have been trained at Taplow and later Northwick Park, and who have subsequently returned to the unit to once again partake of her most generous professional and personal hospitality. When asked what her greatest contribution has been she replies 'training doctors all over the world that children with arthritis are not just miniature adults'. Interestingly she feels that her most influential publication, of which there are over 300, is her booklet for parents *When your child has arthritis*. Of hopes for the future, she would like to see more money and effort being devoted to basic research.

She was born on a Thursday and therefore had 'far to go'. Dr Ansell has not only come a long way but she has brought many others with her. Paediatricians and children with arthritis from all over the world are grateful to her and we wish her many happy years of retirement during which she intends to devote much of her energy to the charity 'Arthritis Care'.