

Carys Bannister

I met Carys for the first time at The IFMSS in the mid 1990s. We were from the same area of the UK, but different cities. Some of you will have known her for years before this.

Carys Margaret Bannister was born in Brazil, in 1935. She grew up in Recife, Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro.

During her school years the family moved to Surrey in England and then trained at Charing Cross Medical School. Carys started in 1953. This was quite an achievement for a woman let alone one with the somewhat fragmented educational background that Carys had.

Carys graduated with honours in surgery in 1958 (the year I was born!) and went on to various surgical training appointments, including in Birmingham and then at the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh. Here Carys got her wide experience of neurosurgery and finally took her fellowship exams for the Royal College of Surgeons in Edinburgh. Carys was awarded the McKeown gold medal by the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh in 1981.

Carys took a postgraduate degree in neurophysiology at Oxford, carrying out research using electrophysiology on motor neurones. Research remained an important part of her career and life right up to her death. She published more than 100 primary research papers and numerous book chapters.

Her clinical interests centred on two areas: the blood supply to the brain and developmental defects of the central nervous system, specifically spina bifida and hydrocephalus.

Following her time at Oxford she worked at Leeds. She attended many courses and conferences to learn how to bring extra blood supply to the brain by stitching tiny vessels together in essential bypass surgery within the brain, and she developed the EC-IC bypass technique. Meanwhile she took up laboratory space in Hull University to pursue her passion for research. This was before the motorway was opened and reflects the commitment Carys had to this aspect of her career, travelling on minor roads to get to Hull from Leeds every week to work in the laboratory come what may.

In addition to her focus on becoming a neurosurgeon, Carys had another side of her life in high adrenaline rally car driving. She drove around in a sporty little car until later in life she took to 4-wheel drives. She also had a large van customised with a bed for herself and cages to drive her dogs to events up and down the length and breadth of the UK.

Eventually Carys achieved her ambition and was appointed consultant neurosurgeon in North Manchester General Hospital and Booth Hall Children's Hospital. She remained in Manchester for the rest of her career. She also transferred her research work from Hull to the medical school in Manchester.

Although not the first "lady brain surgeon" in the UK Carys received a lot of media attention, appearing on the national television and radio. She was a lover of classical music, opera, and animals, the last a consequence of spending a lifetime growing up with animals.

Carys transferred her research to University of Manchester. Here she joined with an established research group to develop her projects on hydrocephalus and spina bifida. In fact she persuaded (would not take no for an answer) the group to take on the project over a coffee in the staff rooms of the research facility. In the subsequent 14 years of work on hydrocephalus she saw the breakthrough in understanding of brain folate handling that has allowed the development of a treatment to prevent the condition before birth and which also maximises the development of the cerebral cortex.

She was awarded an honorary DSc for her research in 2001, and the university filed a patent for the treatment in 2008. On her retirement from neurosurgery Carys was also honoured by the Queen with the award of OBE in the birthday honours list of June 1999.

Retirement gave Carys more time for research, and she spent two days in the lab every week until her health, and sequential moves of the laboratory through different buildings, finally led her to give up laboratory work and take on her many invitations for lecturing (and of course the dog shows, where her corgis won many prizes including best of breed at Crufts).

Throughout her career she chaired sessions of learned societies around the world, was editor on a number of clinical journals, and a committee

member, publication secretary and past president of the Society for Research on Hydrocephalus and Spina Bifida.

Carys died in August 2010. At her funeral a colleague remarked that she was likely to be quizzing St Peter about the role of cerebrospinal fluid in the brain while another said it was more likely she was telling him what it was supposed to do!

In 2012, Manchester University renamed a building in her honour which is now the home of clinical services for Optometry.

Carys and I hatched the plot to bring the IFMSS back to the UK at the 1996 meeting in Capri, when we travelled together to the meeting. She was President for the 1999 meeting when the society “came of age” at its 18th meeting. We held that meeting in Naworth Castle in Cumbria.

I always remember her when I wear the shirt from that meeting, the logo I designed was a modified extract of two ladies from a painting by the famous Manchester painter Lowry, of two women, one of whom I “photoshopped” to be pregnant. The two ladies were meant to be Carys and Sarah Russell, a radiologist colleague of hers from Manchester, who attended a few meetings and helped us greatly with organisation of our meeting.

It is thus entirely fitting that Carys should be remembered in the naming of one of the Travel awards

Ross Welch
Co President 1999