



Warwick Town Council Blue Plaque Unveiling

DR BARBARA ANSELL

1923 – 2001

Pioneer in the treatment
of childhood
rheumatoid arthritis

Lived here



Dr Barbara Ansell

Dr Barbara Mary Ansell, CBE, FRCP, FRCS was born on 30th August 1923 at 24 Jury St, Warwick - the house that now bears a Blue Plaque in her honour. She was the founder of the field of paediatric rheumatology, and was notable for outstanding contributions to the advancement of paediatric knowledge.

She was the only child of Herbert Ansell and his wife, Annie Chubb. At first, Barbara was educated at home, but at the age of 7 she started school at the nearby King's High School, where her mother had also been a pupil. Her father had been Mayor of Warwick but travelled with his work, so in 1935, the same year in which she was awarded a minor scholarship to King's High, she became a boarder at the school. She only appears to have boarded intermittently, however, and in 1940 she wrote an article for the school magazine about the arrival of evacuees in Warwick; two of these girls, from King Edward's School at Camp Hill in Birmingham, were billeted with the Ansell family.

While at King's High she was a Prefect and a good 'all rounder'. Science was her forte, however, and on passing the London High Certificate from King's High in 1941, with a distinction in Biology, she was awarded a Queen's Scholarship at Birmingham University to read Medicine. King's High's association with that university and its Medical School went back to the early 1900s when a women's Hall of Residence was opened, and the first King's High doctor, Elsie Humpherson, gained her medical degree there.

After university, Barbara did her postgraduate training at the Royal Postgraduate Medical School in Hammersmith. In 1951 she was appointed as registrar to Professor Eric Bywaters at the Canadian Red Cross Memorial Hospital, Taplow, Buckinghamshire, where she conducted research on heart disease in rheumatic fever. While focusing on treatment of the disease, she recognised the importance of maintaining educational and social skills in young patients. She pioneered a team system of professionals including physiotherapists,

occupational therapists, nurses, teachers, social workers, ophthalmologists, orthopaedic surgeons, dentists, and podiatrists to treat and manage her patients.

She became a member of the Royal College of Physicians in 1951 where her pioneering work led to the establishment of specialist medical centres worldwide, of which there were 30 in the UK alone at the time of her death. The 1962 school magazine reported that, 'Dr Barbara Ansell continues to make medical history by her appointments to posts never previously held by a woman.'

Barbara Ansell's incredible memory for the details of all the children she had looked after, together with her colleague's meticulous observations and records of the clinical, radiological and pathological manifestations of these diseases, led in 1959 to a classification of the various forms of childhood chronic arthritis.

In 1962, Barbara was appointed consultant clinical physician in rheumatology at Taplow. She was appointed head of Division of Rheumatology at the Clinical Research Centre at Northwick Park Hospital in 1976. She was awarded a scholarship to study in Chicago at the Research

and Education Hospital as a research fellow. In 1997, she was recognised with a Visiting Professorship at Leeds.

Where children suffered with stiffening and distortion of limbs, she pioneered operations, in conjunction with orthopaedic surgeon George Arden. By 1975 Arden had operated on and replaced over 190 damaged hips. The combined work of Ansell and Arden culminated in 1978 in the publication of their book *The Surgical Management of Juvenile Chronic Polyarthritis*.

Dr Ansell was commemorated in a laboratory and a building on the King's High Smith Street site. When King's High moved to new Banbury Road premises in 2019, an Ansell Laboratory was established in her memory.



Barbara Ansell became a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians in 1967, was appointed a CBE in 1982, and an Honorary Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons in 1985 before her retirement three years later. In the course of her work she was honoured in many countries, served on committees looking after the interests of children with crippling health conditions, and published many contributions to textbooks and reviews.

Although she always used the name Ansell professionally, Dr Barbara's married name was Weston. She did not marry until 1985, by which time she was 61, and therefore she had no children. Her husband, a medical colleague, Angus Weston, who predeceased her, was 18 years her senior.

Dr Ansell died in 2001 at the age of 78.

A younger relative recalls, 'At her memorial service in Southwark Cathedral many of 'her children' and colleagues were there from all over the world. She had high expectations and was demanding of her staff and her patients who achieved as well, if not better than their contemporaries. She treated the whole child, not just the illness which was revolutionary at that time. She was very aware of a child's needs in helping them cope with their illness, at one stage providing a patient with chocolate if that was what was going to help. I suspect that some of her demanding practices - while in no way unkind- may not have been encouraged in today's NHS!'



With many thanks
to Polly Beidas