

Anita Harding (1952-1995)



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Anita Harding, professor of neurology in the University of London, died from cancer in 1995 shortly before her 43rd birthday; she had been ill for only five months. With an indefatigable zest for life, an earthy sense of humour and feet placed firmly on the ground despite a soaring reputation, possessing a rare talent for friendship amongst the many and varied people with whom she interacted, and having a natural flair for sensing and patrolling the complex and mysterious ingredients of elite professional success, early death denied Anita the many accolades and appointments that her combination of personality and ability would inevitably have yielded in due course. And, in turn, neurology never benefitted to the full from the many further contributions and outstanding leadership that she would surely have provided. Anita was unable to participate in the discoveries of neurogenetics that modern molecular medicine has made possible. And a generation of neurologists trained since the mid-1990s lost the opportunity of mentorship and supervision by an outstanding clinical neurologist and a very special person. There is no sense in which these losses might be considered speculative or judged ambiguous. Anita was on a trajectory to greatness that was unstoppable. Her achievements in a career which was active from 1977 until a few days before her death were already outstanding; and as the leading clinician scientist of her generation working in the United Kingdom, Anita already ranked as a major figure in late-20th century world neurology.

Born in Ireland, Anita Harding grew up and was educated in Birmingham; she trained in medicine at the Royal Free Hospital School of Medicine (1970-1975) winning a number of undergraduate prizes. As a student she visited the neurological department of the Montreal General Hospital. After hospital appointments at the Royal Free with Professor Dame Sheila Sherlock and Professor PK Thomas (whom she later married), and in Oxford, she trained in general medicine, becoming a member of the Royal College of Physicians in 1977. She worked first at the National Hospital, Queen Square (where her later career was to be based) in 1977 and subsequently joined Dr Cedric Carter as a research fellow in the MRC Clinical Genetics Unit at the Institute of Child Health. Thus began the work that was to shape her career. First she classified monogenic diseases of the nervous system with an emphasis on the hereditary ataxias and peripheral neuropathies. These studies formed the basis for her doctoral thesis on *The Hereditary Ataxias and Paraplegias: a Clinical and Genetic Study*; for this work, she was awarded the Clinical Genetics Society prize and the Edith Pechey Phipson Postgraduate Scholarship from her medical school. Later, she reworked the text into a



monograph on *The Hereditary Ataxias and Related Disorders* published by Churchill Livingstone in 1984. Her single most important discovery, published in *Nature* with Ian Holt and John Morgan-Hughes in 1986 was the first identification of a mitochondrial DNA mutation in human disease and the concept of tissue heteroplasmy of mutant mitochondrial DNA. But Anita also published on the spectrum of trinucleotide repeat disorders in neurodegenerative disease, and on the population genetics of diseases showing ethnic or geographic restriction. Her curriculum vitae records that she secured substantial grant support for her work, supervised five doctoral theses, wrote almost 200 original articles, over 100 reviews or chapters, edited 3 books in addition to her monograph, gave 100 presentations at scientific meetings, and delivered more than 200 invited lectures in the United Kingdom and abroad.

In the year before taking up her post as senior lecturer and honorary consultant at the Institute of Neurology in 1986, Anita had visited laboratories in Cardiff (United Kingdom) and the California Institute of Technology, Massachusetts General Hospital, Seattle, Duke and Denver (USA); these visits proved pivotal in matching her clinical expertise with a knowledge of the emerging discipline of molecular genetics. The subsequent rise in Anita's career was meteoric. She was appointed reader in the University of London and consultant in neurology to the National Hospital in 1987, elected to a personal professorship in 1990, and to the established chair of neurology at the Institute of Neurology in 1995.

Anita's appointments outside Queen Square were equally distinguished. She was elected to Fellowship of the Royal College of Physicians in 1989 and to ten other societies, including corresponding membership of the American Neurological Association. With others, she founded the European Neurological Society in 1986. Anita

served on numerous university and hospital committees, was a member of the editorial boards of eleven journals, and a member of eighteen research committees, including the neuroscience panels of the Wellcome Trust and the Medical Research Council; she was a regular member of the teaching faculty of the American Academy of Neurology; and held visiting professorships at eight universities in the United Kingdom, Europe, north America and Australia.

Anita was due to take over as head of the department of clinical neurology in October 1995. In that post, she would have followed Roger Gilliatt and David Marsden, and she was succeeded by Ian McDonald. This is a formidable quartet and her position in that company deserves comment. The early history of clinical neuroscience in the United Kingdom is a record of individual achievement but without overall strategy and with some discontinuities. With the establishment of a university department at Queen Square in 1962, the discipline and methods of clinical neurology were transferred into investigative work; schools developed and strategic programmes emerged. Anita was at the vanguard of the second wave in this process and she came to

domestic pleasures was to the advantage of her husband, family and friends. As a trainee neurologist at Queen Square, Anita challenged the conventional sartorial uniformity of her male colleagues. Later she dressed with style; Armani suits for the clinic and designer jeans for assigning genes. More than once she was found absent from a scientific meeting through having disappeared with another lady-professor, to which accusation she retorted "when the going gets tough, the tough go shopping".

Outwardly self-assured but never over confident, she was privately self-effacing and there always remained that endearing hint of the gamin. These were essential qualifications for her type of success and they were traits that attracted her to neurologists throughout the world. In their social life, Anita and 'PK' showed remarkable stamina – much more so than many of their guests who, visiting from the other side of the world or the provinces would be entertained until the early hours. On these occasions, Anita excelled in conversation and revealed her breadth of interests - football and cricket in season, contemporary literature and popular culture; she was a tease without mal-

was an ambassador for British neurology, who patrolled the far corners of a still significant empire which had its roots at Queen Square where she worked and was happy. The evidence for her scientific achievement is in the writings, but the style and significance are in the memories; and both will last. ♦

Anita Harding's clinical wisdom, enthusiasm, talent for research, and extraordinary personality epitomise all that is valued most in a clinical scientist

epitomise its style and activities better than any of her contemporaries. Through her marriage to PK (Peter) Thomas (1926 - 2008), himself a huge figure in British neurology from the 1960s, Anita witnessed at first hand the diffusion of academic neurology away from the Institute of Neurology; and, as a close confidant of Roger Gilliatt, she saw at the same time the long-term significance of Queen Square as a National Hospital. Her special trick was to balance the need to nurture both the centre and the periphery, and to export and maintain excellence and influence through a network of clinical, scientific and personal collaborations. Because she knew her trade, and provided what every patient wants - knowledge, experience, interest, time and hope - her clinical opinion was extensively sought; and Anita blossomed in the warmth of good doctoring.

Anita was a devoted worker for British neurology. The trappings of academic life were heaped upon her because, as a woman of inexhaustible energy, Anita met deadlines and she delivered. These were remarkable achievements for a woman in a traditionally chauvinist specialty; that so much was achieved by the age of 43, in a career which was fully active for only 10 years is sobering; that it was done in a style from which respect and friendships grew exponentially is a mark of Anita's personality; and that it was not done at the expense of

ice or waspishness, but above all Anita was the mother of neuro-gossip. She maintained her network of informants by telephone; Sunday was her night for collecting information, and you could be sure that leaks would reach their intended destinations early on Monday morning. In fact, it was a general principle that synaptic transmission in the social nervous system was always first detected by tuning-in to Radio Anita. Her style did not change with success. By chance, a conversation was overheard shortly after her death in which reference was made to Anita's obituary in a national newspaper; she was described as having spent time with each of her staff and professional dependents planning their lives during the last few days of her own, and wryly commenting that it would not now be necessary for her to master Windows 95. "She must have been a wonderful person" remarked the unknown conversationalist.

Anita Harding was ahead of the pack in selecting genetics as a field of study which not everyone would have predicted was heading for such prominence in medicine from the 1990s; she should be remembered for that vision and for the common sense way in which she managed the entry of molecular genetics into neurology. Anita Harding's clinical wisdom, enthusiasm, talent for research, and extraordinary personality epitomise all that is valued most in a clinical scientist. She

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