

Tribute to Dr Joan Wagner

I first met Dr Joan Wagner as a young registrar in the department of paediatrics at the then Johannesburg Hospital, now Charlotte Maxeke Johannesburg Academic Hospital. I had just rotated from a year at Chris Hani Baragwanath Academic Hospital and Joan was a co-consultant with Dr Hessel Utian in charge of one of the units. The two consultants were a contrast in personalities with Dr Utian coming across as strict and regarded by many as being the paediatrician's paediatrician, while Joan was a lot gentler but just as awe inspiring. I had deep respect of Joan's eclectic knowledge which she generously shared with all with a humility that had an infectious quality. Joan seemed to have encountered most of the difficult problems one is faced in dealing with childhood diseases and this knowledge she passed on to so many with enthusiasm and grace. Joan had a special ability to look for and find the good in people and encourage and inspire one to realise their own potential.

I can remember well and with fondness the post intake ward rounds on a Sunday morning, when Joan would arrive with a basket full of freshly baked scones, boiled eggs and goodies for her junior colleagues who had been up most of the night. Such was her care and concern for the staff she worked with and this became a tradition that was appreciated and enjoyed by all. I had the privilege of getting to know Joan over the years and my understanding of what a special person she was grew with the years. I had been taught that the cause of infants admitted with bronchiolitis was usually due to a virus. With a twinkle in her eye, Joan would always tell the post intake team that she would add an antibiotic, but that John would not agree with her.

Joan was a paediatrician of many talents and wide interests as Dr Utian used to tell us that Joan was offered the post of head of the paediatric cardiology unit but turned it down because she had her young children to look after. He also mentioned that she was the first person to describe the haemolytic uraemic syndrome, but because she was on maternity leave, delayed in writing it up and was pipped at the post by Dr Gasser.

Joan found herself drawn to the needs of the many children who were struggling academically at school as well as developmentally delayed children. She was the first "unofficial" developmental paediatrician in Johannesburg and started the developmental clinic at the Johannesburg Hospital as well as at the Coronation Hospital where she run a weekly clinic. She also started the Nokuthula stimulation centre for developmentally delayed children in the Alexandra informal settlement.

Joan was one of the most intelligent doctors I have encountered but was always humble and unassuming. My mother taught her at Rodean School many years ago, and she said that Joan was one of the brightest students she had ever taught. She had an endearing and somewhat frustrating character of speaking extremely rapidly, that one would battle to keep up with what she was saying. I had to listen extremely carefully, missing many words and hoping I could get the gist of what she was saying. I do believe that she was trying to keep up with the multitude of thoughts that were surging through her brain. She wrote just as fast, making deciphering her handwriting a great challenge.

She was a keen member of PANDA, attending many of our meetings. PANDA had the honour of bestowing a lifetime achievement award on Joan, which she graciously accepted at one of our PANDA weekends a few years ago. I can remember on one of the weekends at the mountains, we had a free Saturday afternoon to get out and take advantage of the walking trails. At one point in our walk, we had to cross a shallow mountain stream which had stepping-stones that one could cross over on. There were some of us who were not so sure footed and reluctant to chance the slippery rocks. Without much hesitation, Joan, well in her 70s, sat down next to the stream, carefully removed her stockings and proceeded to glide across the slippery rocks like a gazelle and then came back to help the very much younger colleagues, much to our embarrassment.

Joan was humble enough to ask for help and Gail and I can well remember the phone calls, usually on a Sunday evening, when she would ask one of us to see a patient that she was having problems in establishing a diagnosis. I knew well enough that her assessment would be correct and that I would perhaps just confirm what she had diagnosed.

It was a privilege to be a colleague and friend of such a woman of substance and grace. I indeed have fond and happy memories.
May she rest in peace and rise in glory.

John Rodda