OBITUARY

Geraldine O’Sullivan

News of the sad and untimely death of Geraldine O’Sullivan came as a great shock to many. She was one of the most popular, well-respected and internationally renowned figures in obstetric anaesthesia and her loss at such a young age is tragic.

Geraldine graduated from the National University of Ireland in 1975 and started her anaesthetic training in Cork. In 1978 she moved to Oxford where she stayed until 1984. During this time she developed her interest in obstetric anaesthesia, spending two years as a research fellow. Her research with a variety of notable experts including Drs. Bullingham, McQuay and Carrie produced a string of excellent publications and led to the award of an MD for her work on the assessment of gastric function in pregnancy. From Oxford she moved to London to complete her anaesthetic training at St Thomas’ Hospital, and here she teamed-up with Felicity Reynolds. Their collaboration resulted in further high-quality and influential research. Throughout her career at St Thomas’, Geraldine had a huge influence both within the anaesthetic department and the wider hospital. She remained lead for obstetric anaesthesia for many years, delivering and developing the service with exceptional clinical skills, knowledge and the ability to inspire her team.

Of her many and varied research projects, it will be her work on gastric physiology for which Geraldine will be best remembered. She was widely regarded as the international expert on this subject about which she wrote with such clarity. Her research discredited much of the myth and anecdote about oral intake in labour, replacing it with sound data and valid conclusions. She demonstrated the relative safety of drinking isotonic sports drinks in labour; something which had hitherto been considered by most anaesthetists to be contraindicated. In the largest study to date, she demonstrated a lack of difference in maternal or neonatal outcomes between consumption of either water or a light diet in labour. Geraldine was a huge source of inspiration as a supervisor, guide, teacher and friend for so many trainees.

There have been few, if any, better lecturers than Geraldine. Her encyclopaedic knowledge together with her playful wit and superb delivery meant that her presentations were always highly entertaining. She had the capacity to hold the audience’s attention throughout. Most recently, her lectures on the problems of obesity in obstetric anaesthesia were quite brilliant in highlighting the important issues in an entertaining, yet respectful, manner; delegate feedback was always of the highest order. She was popular with meeting organisers receiving invitations to speak from around the globe.

On the international stage, Geraldine contributed both in the developed and developing world, visiting many countries where she helped to introduce and support obstetric anaesthetic services. She was an active member of the European Society of Anaesthesiology for whom she served as Council member and as elected Chair of the National Anaesthesia Societies Committee. Geraldine also served two terms as a member of the OAA Executive Committee. Her tireless enthusiasm and widespread popularity resulted in her election as OAA President in 2002. When her term of office finished in 2005 she remained on the Executive Committee, most recently as International Liaison Officer.

Her keen scientific mind and great wisdom have been a great asset to the International Journal of Obstetric Anesthesia for many years. In 1991, she was one of the founding members of the Editorial Board on which she continued to serve. Her mental sharpness and pertinent comments were beneficial to both authors and Editors and her input, especially at Board meetings, will be sadly missed.

It was not just in obstetric anaesthesia that Geraldine had an impact. She also specialised in ophthalmic and vascular anaesthesia where she was widely respected by her surgical colleagues. Out of work, she was a keen tennis player and marvellous company socially. She was a brilliant hostess, inviting various dignitaries and overseas visitors to her London home when they were invited to speak at OAA meetings. She had the capacity to engage everyone in conversation on almost any topic, always leaving people with a smile on their face. Even
when ill she continued to work, writing and lecturing until only a few weeks before her death.

Geraldine will be missed for so many reasons; her untiring energy and dedication in the support of pregnant women, her outstanding clinical research, her wonderful lecturing style and clear and concise writing. But perhaps her greatest attribute was her ability to engage with everyone she met. The world of obstetric anaesthesia has lost one of its most respected and well-loved figures.

She leaves her husband Richard and two daughters, Sophie and Olivia, about whom she loved to talk. Our thoughts are with them.

Acknowledgement

I am very grateful to Mark Scrutton for his helpful comments and supplying a photograph taken from our time at the 2012 SOAP meeting in Monterey, California.