

Obituary

Dr Lisbeth Hockey, OBE, FRCN 1918–2004 An Appreciation of her Contribution to the Nursing Profession

It is a great privilege to be asked to give this appreciation of Dr Lisbeth Hockey's distinguished contribution to the nursing profession and primary care. Over her lifetime she gave unstinting service, first as a nurse committed to the highest of standards, then as a nurse tutor and later on as a researcher, acknowledged internationally as a pioneer in her field.

While it is impossible to do justice to *all* Lisbeth's achievements, I have tried to select some examples from the different phases of her life and work that I believe highlight the unique skills, intellectual ability, generosity of spirit and wisdom that she used to such good effect.

It is only right I think to begin by reminding ourselves of the difficult times that Lisbeth had to endure as a young woman trying to establish herself in a career. She had completed three years of a medical degree at the university of her home town of Graz in Austria when her parents despatched her to England, away from the threatening political situation in Hitler's Germany. It is testimony to her indomitable spirit that she very swiftly learnt to speak English and then, when it became clear that she could not pursue her medical studies in this country, she applied and was accepted for nurse training at the London Hospital.

It is absolutely typical of Lisbeth that in reflecting on her student nurse days she was very critical of the standard of the lectures, deeply disappointed at the passiveness of the nursing profession at that time and irritated by the rules and regulations of hospital life. The reason that she carried on was because of her love for, and commitment to, the patients. It was through her dedication to patients and in responding to their needs that Lisbeth began to exercise her ability to

ask penetrating questions. While she was still a student nurse she observed that some patients developed pressure sores, while others of the same age and medical condition did not. With her curiosity aroused, Lisbeth responded to this situation by keeping methodical notes on these patients and the development or avoidance of pressure sores. Armed with her 'data', she asked the ward sister to explain her observations. The ward sister promptly told her that she should not take notes while working or indeed ask such questions. She added that 'if we knew the answer we would not have sores'. This experience had an enormous impact on Lisbeth and helped to convince her that questioning professional practice is the platform upon which knowledge can be built.

Lisbeth's early career encompassed qualifications in fever nursing in 1942, general nursing in 1945, and then subsequently midwifery, district nursing, health visiting and nurse teaching. She held a number of posts that allowed her to practise in all these fields right up until the early 1960s. In 1965, she was appointed as tutor and then research officer at the Queen's Institute of District Nursing in London. This is the point at which her research career became established and she completed a series of studies that addressed important aspects of district nursing. It is important to remember that at that time nursing research barely existed. There was no discernible community of nursing scholars, no nursing research journals and very few people to whom one could turn for mentorship. This makes Lisbeth's contribution all the more remarkable. In addition to this, during the same period, she also achieved an honours degree in Economics from LSE which she undertook on a part-time

basis alongside her full-time job. This is a quite outstanding achievement.

Following this pioneering work, still quoted today in academic papers, at conferences and in PhD theses, Lisbeth took up the position in 1971 of Director of the Nursing Research Unit at the University of Edinburgh, the first of its kind, in Europe. The establishment and development of the unit really highlighted to government and to the profession the significance of nursing research and its potential to contribute knowledge for the delivery of care and the organization of the nursing service. It was during the period of her directorship that Lisbeth gained her PhD and was awarded a number of honours. She was given an OBE in 1979, a fellowship of the Royal College of Nursing in 1980, an honorary doctorate in Law at the University of Alberta, Canada in the same year, an honorary doctorate at the University of Uppsala in Sweden in 1985 and an honorary fellowship of the Royal College of General Practitioners in 1982, an honour of which she was particularly proud. In her position as director, Lisbeth consolidated and extended her reputation as a researcher, writer, lecturer and scholar. Hers was a worldwide reputation and she travelled and spoke throughout Europe, Canada and North America.

I was fortunate to hear Lisbeth present at a number of conferences, workshops and seminars. In teaching and informing others she excelled. She could cut right to the heart of key issues and she was prepared to challenge and be provocative. She imparted an enthusiasm for the pursuit of knowledge, reminded us of the importance of asking questions and championed the cause of high standards in the care of patients. In addition to all these attributes in her public addresses, she could also be very entertaining. I will always remember, right at the beginning of one conference presentation Lisbeth surveyed her audience for a moment or two with a completely straight face and then produced a small piece of paper from which she read in a loud clear voice – ‘turn the oven on to 200 degrees Fahrenheit and select a clean biscuit tin’. There was a collective murmur of surprise from the conference delegates as we thought we were about to receive a recipe for a Victoria sponge cake. Not a bit of it. This was Lisbeth’s inimitable way of informing us of the laborious instructions that she had to follow as a district nurse when sterilizing dressings.

Of course district nursing remained one of her major professional concerns and I would like to pay special tribute to her contribution to the Queen’s Nursing Institute, Scotland. She served as a member of the Education Committee and as a member of council over a period of 37 years. I had the privilege of working with her and her great friend Dr Ekke Kuennsberg for a few years before she reluctantly resigned her membership. One of our tasks on the committee was to develop ideas for educational events that would focus on key issues of the day and on challenges that district nurses were confronting as a result of changes in government policy. Her breadth of experience and wisdom and her ability to observe events with such clarity contributed hugely to our programme.

Lisbeth’s curriculum vitae states that she officially retired in 1982. I am sure that most people agree that she never really retired. She retained a number of professional and academic commitments long into her retirement and was still delivering keynote papers in her late seventies, which for many of us would be a daunting prospect. She also continued to mentor, supervise and support a large number of nurse researchers. I was lucky enough to share the supervision of a PhD student with Lisbeth and another colleague. We used to meet in Lisbeth’s flat to save her the trouble of travelling. Of course we had some very serious discussions, but we also had many laughs and the hospitality was outstanding. There was never just one plate of biscuits, but usually three, as well as a cake. This feast would all be laid out immaculately with crisp linen and the best china. I used to think to myself, if Lisbeth goes to this much trouble for her guests, her patients would have wanted for nothing.

To conclude, it has been very easy to think of many reasons for celebrating and giving thanks for Lisbeth’s unique contribution to the nursing profession. She was a truly great lady. She gave so much and there are literally hundreds of people worldwide who will remember her with gratitude and affection.

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*This appreciation was spoken at the Service
of Thanksgiving
Davidson’s Mains Parish Church, Edinburgh
Monday 21 June 2004*