Obituary

Ailie Gordon Key MD MB ChB

Ailie Gordon Key, the latest recipient of the Medal of the International Medical Society of Paraplegia was born on October 25, 1926. She was the first female recipient of this prestigious award and also the first from Africa.

Her father was a specialist psychiatrist who was head of the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Cape Town Medical School and superintendent of the Valkenberg Psychiatric Hospital. She matriculated from St Cyprian's School for Girls, Cape Town and studied for her MB ChB at the University of Cape Town, graduating in 1950. Her internship was at the Moroka Mission Hospital, Thaba Nchu in the Orange Free State and the Provincial Hospital, Port Elizabeth.

In 1952 she married Harold Tronson and had three children, Jennifer and twins, Fiona and Gillian. Jennifer and Fiona are both married and each have two children who were the apples of their grandmother's eyes. Harold stimulated her interest in

HAM radio and she was an avid radio ham. Harold sadly passed away in 1969.

Ailie became involved in spinal cord injuries in 1964 when she joined the then recently formed spinal unit at the Conradie Hospital in Cape Town under the late Dr P J M Retief. She visited and worked at Stoke Mandeville Hospital for six weeks where she came under the influence of the late Sir Ludwig Guttmann. This developed into a lifelong friendship.

In 1969 she became clinical administrative head of the spinal unit. Under her guidance, the Conradie Spinal Injury Unit became one of the leading units in the world. She was responsible for attracting Christa Meyer (an occupational therapist and expert in dynamic splinting of the tetraplegic hand) to the Conradie Spinal Unit.

Under her influence a department of bioengineering was established at Conradie Hospital under the late Dr Colin Ruch. At present the department consists of two orthotists-prosthetists. Advancements while

she was head of the spinal unit include the development of (1) pronator splint for C5 tetraplegics, (2) Biocon and later the ABCO cervical orthosis, (3) chin controls for motorised hand splints and (4) modification of the Engen prehension splint, the motorised hand splint and mobile arm support. During her time in the spinal unit the number of beds increased from 75 to 210, making it one of the biggest spinal units in the world. She always encouraged her medical and paramedical staff to publish papers and attend congresses and stimulated their interest in spinal cord injury.

She herself published many papers and participated in many IMSOP conferences. She was (1) council member of IMSOP from 1974 and vice-president from 1984 to 1987, (2) member of the South African National Council of Cheshire Homes Organisation, (3) representative for the Western Cape region on the National Council of the South African Association for the Physically Disabled, (4) past chairman of the Medical Classification Committee and life member of South African Sports for Physically Disabled and (5) management committee mem-

ber of Astra School for Physically Disabled Children.

Ailie was a recognised expert in her field in South Africa and gave evidence in numerous medicolegal cases. She retired in 1985 but was still very active in the field of spinal cord injuries, being involved in the welfare organisations mentioned. This distinguished doctor was a great family person and divided her time after retirement between her family, medicolegal work and welfare organisations for the physically disabled.

Unfortunately her health deteriorated in the last few years and she was not able personally to receive her medal in Barcelona. She sadly passed away on December 11, 1992 after a long illness which had slowed her down considerably in the last months of her life. She maintained her interest in the physically disabled till the last and will be sadly missed by colleagues and patients alike.

Dr Ray Shrosbree
Ithuseng Spinal Unit, Welkom
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