

## Obituary

### Anita Harding 1952–95



Anita Elizabeth Harding, professor of clinical neurology and head of neurogenetics at the National Hospital for Neurology and Neurosurgery and the Institute of Neurology, Queen Square, died in London on 11 September 1995 aged 42. She was born in Birmingham on 17 September 1952.

Anita Harding was brought up in Birmingham and educated at the King Edward VI High School for Girls. There she became an avid soccer fan, supporting West Bromwich Albion, and developed her tastes for skiing, rock music, and travel which she retained throughout her life. Anita was trained at The Royal Free Hospital School of Medicine qualifying in record time at the age of 23. Her early interest in genetic diseases of the nervous system was kindled by the then head of neurology at the Royal Free Hospital, Professor P K Thomas, whom she married in 1977.

It was as a research fellow in Cedric Carter's Clinical Genetics Unit at the Institute of Child Health that Anita's lifelong commitment to neurogenetics started to take shape. There she began her studies of the inherited ataxias, paraplegias, and peripheral neuropathies which led to widely accepted classifications, and formed the basis of her doctoral thesis in 1981. Anita received her early training in neurology with Roger Gilliatt at the Middlesex Hospital so that, when she took up a residency at the National Hospital in 1982, she was already well versed in the Queen Square tradition. Anita rose quickly through the ranks at Queen Square, being appointed lecturer in 1983, senior lecturer in 1986, reader and consultant neurologist in 1987, and professor of clinical neurology and head of neurogenetics in 1990.

Anita learnt the techniques of molecular genetics during a short sabbatical mainly spent in the United States. There she visited the laboratories of Giuseppe Attardi, James Gusella, Allen Roses, Thomas Bird, and David Stumpf. On her return to Queen Square, she set up the first Molecular Neurogenetics Research Group in Britain during the Autumn of 1985. The next 10 years marked an era of high achievement for Anita and her collaborators. They made fundamental discoveries in a number of inherited conditions including the mitochondrial myopathies and Leber's hereditary optic neuropathy, the dystonias and hereditary ataxias and familial amyloidoses and their findings formed the basis of over 200 journal publications and reviews. Their research found practical application in the weekly neurogenetics clinic where Anita and her colleagues provided a comprehensive diagnostic and counselling service on a national basis. Because of popular demand a separate service DNA laboratory was established at Queen Square in 1988. Anita also found the time to chair committees, give invited lectures around the world, edit or coedit three books on neurogenetics, and write state of the art chapters for over 50 more. Her clinical and scientific achievements won her international recognition and made her an acknowledged authority in a rapidly growing and exciting field.

When not at work, Anita and PK had a rich variety of other interests. They were renowned for their hospitality and their enjoyment of good food and wine in the company of friends. In addition to skiing and rock music, Anita also enjoyed mountain biking, trekking, and carpentry. She was quietly proud of her handiwork and is reputed to have believed, not without some justification, that if she had not been a doctor, she could have made her way successfully in the world as a joiner and carpenter.

The love and support of her husband, PK, her mother, Jean, and her closest friends, helped Anita to endure the pain and suffering of a devastating illness with remarkable courage and enormous dignity. Despite knowing that she was terminally ill, her main concern was for the future welfare of her research fellows and the other members of her department. The news of her death brought great sadness and a deep sense of personal loss to everyone at Queen Square as it did to her many friends and colleagues throughout the world. Anita was a much loved figure at the National Hospital, not just for her scientific achievements, which were formidable, but for her informal and approachable manner and her willingness, no matter how busy she was, to help out with a difficult case. Had she lived, Anita would have become head of the Institute's Department of Clinical Neurology in October 1995. Her personal warmth and compassion, her creativity and good humour, and her seemingly boundless energy and infectious enthusiasm for her work would have made Anita the ideal person to take neurology and the neurosciences at Queen Square into the 21st century. With her death, academic neurology the world over has been deprived of one of its brightest and most talented stars.

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