

RES MEDICA

Journal of the Royal Medical Society



Pat Strong 1920 - 2000

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Abstract

Pat was an institution - widely admired and respected. Pat was a guide, philosopher and friend, confidante and counsellor to generations of medical students and young doctors. Above all Pat was a remarkable warm and vibrant person loved not only by her own family but by a huge and ever-increasing circle of friends.

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ISSN: 2051-7580 (Online) ISSN: ISSN 0482-3206 (Print)

Res Medica is published by the Royal Medical Society, 5/5 Bristo Square, Edinburgh, EH8 9AL

Res Medica, 2001 : 6-8

doi: [10.2218/resmedica.v0i0.984](https://doi.org/10.2218/resmedica.v0i0.984)

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Pat was an institution - widely admired and respected. Pat was a guide, philosopher and friend, confidante and counsellor to generations of medical students and young doctors. Above all Pat was a remarkable warm and vibrant person loved not only by her own family but by a huge and ever-increasing circle of friends.

Life did not deal Pat an easy hand - the aces were often hidden, but she was tough and resilient and resourceful - and totally lacking in self pity. Born not an Essex girl, but a middlesex maiden, she worked for a time in a veterinary laboratory, and then during the war, in the War Office. The happiness of marrying Robin Russell rapidly turned to tragedy when within just three weeks of the wedding she was widowed when her RAF pilot husband was killed on active service. From this devastating blow she slowly recovered and in time she fell in love with and eventually married Tom Strong, who was a civil servant, and moved with him to his native city here in Edinburgh.

She refused to consider herself a naturalised Scot and remained admirably and defiantly English - tolerantly amused by the Edinburgh obsessions with where one went to school and observing Edinburgh's development in the post-war years from the city of the warmly welcoming greeting of 'you'll have had your tea' to the cosmopolitan centre of culture, finance and government - though one was well advised to keep clear of the subject of devolution and the Scottish Parliament

in her company - advice I frequently failed to heed, precipitating disagreements which were never (and never going to be) resolved.

Together Pat and Tom brought up their three daughters - Rosie and the Twins Flick and Lynn, and as Flick took up athletics Pat revived her own interest in the sport - she had been a high jumper, with county honours, and she trained and qualified as an athletics coach and was for many years associated with Edinburgh Southern Harriers.

In the mid 1960's Pat was appointed to the part-time post of Permanent Secretary to the Royal Medical Society, the oldest student medical society in the world, and after a very few years had become something of a legend in her own lifetime. Tom died suddenly in 1975, and with her own family grown up - though still very close and very much part of her life, the RMS became in a very real sense Pat's extended family.

As Permanent Secretary Pat always very properly maintained the polite fiction that in the Society she was simply the administrator who did the bidding of Council. But by her influence, her manipulation of affairs, and her orders (thinly disguised as advice) she contributed in a unique and entirely beneficent way to the life and work of the Royal Medical Society for a third of a century. Part-time in theory she made her job virtually full time in practice. It is an achievement which is unlikely to be equalled and which will certainly never be

surpassed.

But there was more to it - much more - than simply doing superbly well the job to which she had been appointed. I do not know when it was, or who it was who first dubbed her 'Auntie Pat' - soon to be contracted to 'AP', by which designation she was almost universally known, but those two letters summed up so neatly the relationship which existed with generations of medical students; one of mutual affection, occasional exasperation, but always respect, deepening to love in many instances. She could have written a book, but perhaps it is as well that she did not, as her knowledge of the complexities of the emotional affairs of countless students might embarrass some if expressed on paper, but the good which she did by sympathetic listening, giving unsentimentally practical advice and providing a shoulder to cry on is quite incalculable.

The members of the Royal Medical Society appreciated the enormous contribution which AP made over the years; they bestowed on her Honorary Membership, year after year at Annual Dinners the Presidents acknowledged the central role she played in the life of the RMS, and it is perhaps no longer a secret that the student members recently set in train the process for recommending AP for a national honour - and there is no doubt that appointment to the Order of the British Empire would have been a highly appropriate and richly deserved recognition.

Pat believed in tradition, in decency and good manners, and she quietly and unobtrusively inculcated these beliefs. She had firm views and was not afraid to articulate them but there were only two things, I believe, that she simply could not tolerate, and these were hypocrisy and pomposity. Despite, or perhaps because of her close proximity to medical students she had a healthy scepticism about the general uselessness of doctors, especially in the current climate of neo-puritanism. I am not sure that she would have agreed with T S Eliot when he wrote 'There are no doctors in hell - at least not in a professional capacity'.

Pat derived much pleasure from bridge - and indeed taught many students that game. She

derived satisfaction from her garden and she was an astonishingly sharp solver of crossword clues, right up to her last days. She loved France, especially Provence; at the age of 70 she canoed 20 miles down the Dordogne with Lynn, at 80 she flew in a helicopter. She remained in control practically to the end. It was also typical that when I visited her just days after her stroke her main concern was to ask me to ensure that the arrangements were all in hand for the RMS Annual Dinner. It was also typical that when a dearly loved visitor asked her, as she was drifting in and out of consciousness in her last hours if there was anything he could get for her, she murmured 'a packet of Benson and Hedges'.

I do not know - no one of us knows - what happens after death. I do not know if there are Pearly Gates - I somehow doubt it, but if there are I can visualise some guardian angels currently getting a very hard time of it trying to explain their no-smoking policy to Pat.

Pat, more than most, filled 'the unforgiving minute with sixty seconds worth of distance run'. It is hard for us to grasp that she is gone, and yet, while she is no longer physically with us, in important ways she is not gone.

Death takes much away, but it cannot take away memories. Rosie, Flick, Lynn and the grandchildren, to whom our hearts go out in sincere and loving sympathy, must have many precious memories, and they will remain. For many of us the memory of Pats' genuine astonishment and delight just a few months ago, when all unsuspecting she walked innocently by an emerging crowd of relatives and friends singing "Happy Birthday to You", is one which time will not blot out.



Death takes much away, but it cannot take away achievements. Pats' achievements were remarkable, not least the achievement of working till the age of 80 and dying, as I believe she would have wished, 'in harness'. she had (and this is a significant achievement) the wonderful gift of making the young feel mature and the mature feel young. Her contribution to the RMS was such that she surely earned the description of the society itself written by a member in the nineteenth century as 'that noble, old and yet young institution, one of the chief glories of the Edinburgh School of Medicine'.

Death takes much away, but it cannot take away relationships. We shall see her no more, but our love for her, and her love for us without doubt endures. We properly mourn today a real loss, but we must set in the other side of the balance an even greater gain - gain we have had, and continue to have from knowing loving such a remarkable and such a wonderful woman. And for that we can thank god



The main meeting hall of The Royal Medical Societys' rooms in Edinburgh has been renamed the Pat Strong Room in recognition of her years of dedicated service to the society