

Testimonials for Barbara Ansell and BANNAR

Our Family and Dr Barbara Ansell

My name is Martyn. My twin, Sarah (Sally) and I were born in 1952. Sally died earlier this year. At the age of four, Sally developed Still's Disease (now known as Childhood Rheumatoid Arthritis). Starting with a stiff neck, and moving rapidly to her wrists and beyond, the disease was devastating. Paediatricians over the succeeding 7 years seemed at a loss to know how to treat her. Then out of the blue in 1963 my parents heard (but not from the medical profession) of an international specialist in the disease, Dr Barbara Ansell.

Dr Ansell was based in Taplow, Bucks., at the WW2 Canadian Red Cross Memorial Hospital, a very depressing "temporary" building, with sprawling single storey wards.

My parents, Sally and I one day drove from South Wales to meet Dr Ansell, frankly with low expectations. We were wrong: Dr Ansell presented a formidable and overpowering presence. Having examined Sally at great length she demanded that she stay and not return home with us. She was admitted to the dedicated Ansell ward on the spot, and for the next 6 years was an on/off resident at the hospital.

Dr Ansell had been appalled that Sally's condition had not been appropriately treated. A great deal of irreparable damage had been done in the preceding 7 years, much of which could have been avoided. She was also extremely interested in the fact that Sally was a twin, her "only pair" for the next 8 or 9 years. She conducted detailed examinations of both Sally and me in the early years, looking for clues - similarities and differences. Dr Ansell clearly approached the disease from all angles. She ruled her domain with a rod of iron; the girls and boys under her care and living in the dedicated ward were extremely wary of her!

The routine was trying and tedious for the children, and they were naturally disposed to avoid doing the constant exercises and routines necessary. It was Dr Ansell's sheer perseverance with them that resulted in dramatic improvements in their condition, setting them up for their adult lives.

The ward was a tough social environment, and the kids had to learn to be tough to survive. It was a closed and tiny community, with schooling provided within the ward. Sally's character was forged by her many hospital stays in general, but by her extended years in and out of Taplow in particular.

In the early '70's, Dr Ansell was invited to tour America: she proposed that Sally and I should join her as exhibits! At the last moment she didn't need us - she'd been presented with a new patient, and that patient was an IDENTICAL twin, which made them far more interesting. Sally must have got on rather well with Dr Ansell, probably because she was also fairly contrarian, and would not have been totally overwhelmed by her! Anyway, at some point Sally subsequently was offered a job by Dr Ansell to be her secretary. Sadly, Sally declined: she wanted to forget about hospitals and illness and just get on with life.

Ironically Sally ended up in middle age working in Exeter for a hip and knee surgeon, which she declared to be the best working years of her life!

Dr Ansell had the most extraordinary effect on so many children's lives: not only was she arguably the leading specialist in the treatment of Childhood Rheumatoid Arthritis, but her knowledge was magnified and utilised to an enormous extent by her very powerful personality. Her patients remained awestruck by her as well as eternally grateful.

Those patients coming on after Dr Ansell's retirement will continue to have benefited by her profound influence on the treatment of children who suffer from this dreadful condition.

Martyn, December 2022

Thank you!

I met Sarah (BANNAR Project Officer) at the Versus Arthritis stall in the OT show in Birmingham, 2022. I mentioned to Sarah that I have Rheumatoid Arthritis (RA) and wanted to get some more information and guidance around this condition. Sarah was absolutely lovely and shared her own experiences with RA too, which definitely made me feel less alone and more hopeful for the future.

She was the first person I had ever met with RA, and so speaking to her felt like a weight off my shoulders, finally someone who understood everything I was saying. She shared some useful tips on diet, exercise, medication options, and support groups for young people with RA, which was all very useful and gave me a greater understanding of this condition, the resources out there and how to better manage RA.

Morsal, aged 23