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BERYL CORNER

*OBE, JP, MD, FRCP (Lond), FRCPCCh (Hon),
MD Hon (Bristol), DSc Hon (UWE)
(1910 – 2007)*

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Beryl Corner was a founder member of the Bristol Medico-Historical Society in 1985 and its third President, 1995-1999. Many of you will remember her contributions to our Proceedings which included papers on *'The Care of the Newborn in Antiquity'* and *'The Beginning of Neonatology in Bristol'*. She also spoke to us about Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell and Clemens Von Pirquet. In her last talk at the age of 94 in 2004, she gave us a memorable account of the bombing of the Bristol Children's Hospital in 1942: *'Phoenix arises from the Ashes'*. Beryl died following a stroke in March 2007 at the age of 96. I had the privilege of giving an address at her thanksgiving service in Christchurch, Clifton. In the very short time available today, I think it best if I repeat what I said on that occasion:

'As a paediatrician, I was a colleague of Dr. Beryl Corner at Southmead Hospital from 1963 onwards. Beryl's nieces from America, Jane and Sally, have asked me to say a few words about Dr. Corner's professional career. This is some task! How does one compress into a few minutes Beryl's achievements during 42 years of active medical practice, followed by another 30 years of almost equally active retirement? Many, including myself, have always regarded Beryl as being indestructible. Maybe we were not wrong, for she has left us with memories that will remain fresh for many,

many years to come.

Beryl was born in Henleaze, Bristol, on December 9th, 1910, and received her education at Redland High School for Girls where she was regularly placed top of the form. She began her medical training at the Royal Free Hospital in London with the aid of a scholarship at the age of 17 (Fig 1).



Fig 1 Beryl Corner, aged 17



Fig 2 Royal Hospital for Sick Children, Bristol, 1990

She was a brilliant student, winning prizes in no less than five clinical subjects. Qualifying as a doctor in 1934, she then acquired both an MD and an MRCP within the next two years, and at the age of 26 was appointed Honorary Physician to the Out-Patients at the Royal Hospital for Sick Children, here in Bristol, thus becoming the first paediatrician to be appointed in the South West of England (Fig 2).

During the years that followed, Beryl notched up many other 'firsts': She was among the first in 1935 to help to successfully treat a child with streptococcal septicaemia using Prontosil, the fore-runner of the sulphonamides; she was one of the first to treat a baby with Rh haemolytic disease using Rh negative blood; that was in 1943; in 1945 she was one of the first women doctors to be elected to membership of the previously exclusively male Bristol

Paediatric Association. In 1947 she was the first clinical lecturer in paediatrics in the South West Region. In the mid-1940s, she was the first paediatrician in England to set up a service for newborn babies, a subject to which I will return in a moment. In 1948 she was the first paediatrician in this country in over 100 years to successfully rear quadruplets: the Good quads.



Fig 3 Dr. Beryl Corner, 1963

She was one of the first, in 1949, to appreciate that premature infants might suffer brain damage from severe jaundice and to appreciate the need for exchange transfusion in order to prevent it. She was the first (and it has to be said, the last) to use methylscopolamine in 1955 to treat pyloric stenosis medically.

With Bill Gillespie, in 1960, she was the first to demonstrate the value of hexachlorophane in banishing staphylococcal infection from our nurseries. Then with the MRC she was one of the team to first study the value of streptomycin in the treatment of TB meningitis and also to investigate the cause of blindness in premature infants due to excess of oxygen. It is not easy to estimate how many infant and child lives were saved by her initiatives and care.

It is still difficult to imagine Bristol without Beryl (Fig 3). She was, of course, a very small person, especially in later years. The sight of her huge white Mercedes moving in a stately fashion through the traffic without apparently having anyone at the wheel, struck fear into the heart of many a motorist. Nor were motorists the only one to feel fear. When Beryl arrived on a ward round, even the most innocent experienced a peculiar sense of discomfort in case they had in some way done wrong. You have to appreciate that Beryl had been schooled in a chauvinistic male-dominated medical world. She had to be tough to survive – and survive she did in fine style although, to be honest, she was not always an easy colleague. Yet to her juniors, especially if they were women, she gave unstinted encouragement. Indeed she took a tremendous interest in, and care of, both medical students and young doctors-in-training coming from around the world, inspiring them with her dedication and talents, and providing them with friendly – and also sometimes financial – support when the need arose.

A few years ago, I asked Beryl what she considered to be her most important achievement. Without hesitation she replied: ‘The establishment of newborn care as a paediatric responsibility’. I wish she could be here to tell you the story herself because it is quite a story but if she were here, I have to tell you, you would probably miss your lunch!



Fig 4 Bombing of the Bristol Children's Hospital in 1942

Instead I will mention just a few of the highlights: in 1942 at the height of the war when the Blitz was on and the Bristol Children's Hospital was bombed (Fig 4), Beryl and Matron had to re-enter the damaged hospital at night to recover a baby patient that had been left behind by mistake. At that time, Beryl was running virtually single-handed the whole paediatric service in Bristol. It was then that the Chief Medical Officer, Professor Parry, invited her to take on responsibility from the obstetricians for the care of all the newborn in the City. Without hesitation she accepted. Her

first action was to visit Dr. Victoria Mary Crosse in Birmingham who had set up a service for premature babies at Sorrento Hospital in the 1930s, and to study her methods.

Back in Bristol, Beryl set about introducing a neonatal service from scratch with the most minimum resources. Doctors, midwives and nurses required training, neonatal records had to be designed and equipment purchased. In 1946 she opened at Southmead Hospital, with Sister Luffman, the first Special Care Baby Unit for newborn infants in the UK. In 1948 a breast milk bank, possibly the first in the country, was also opened there. At that time too, she introduced an out-reach premature baby team of health visitors, able to follow up these vulnerable babies after they had returned home. In 1966 Beryl designed a brand new SCBU at Southmead Hospital (Fig 5).



Fig 5 The Special Care Baby Unit, Southmead Hospital,
opened 1966

Her own special interest was in the neuro-developmental follow-up of small, premature babies. Eventually, in 1960, she published all her experience in a text book called 'Prematurity'. I remember it well as my consultant in Birmingham at that time gave it to me as a Christmas present.

Beryl's activities extended way beyond her clinical paediatric duties; among them one might mention air-raid medical duties, Red Cross work, lecturing and teaching, and even ministering to the animals of Bristol Zoo and especially to her beloved baby apes, eight of which she cared for including one in the Special Care Unit of the old Bristol Maternity Hospital. Apart from her many contributions in the UK, Beryl also undertook sterling work abroad, especially in India and the Far East, on behalf of the World Health Organisation and the British Council. Back in Bristol, there were duties as a magistrate and work for the Prison and Probation Services. She was also deeply involved with her old school, Redland High School for Girls, and in activities at Christchurch. A founder member of the Southmead Hospital orchestra, she was also director of the Bristol Music Club. Not for nothing, she was elected president of the Medical Women's International Association in 1978. This was one of at least eight presidencies that she undertook over the years, including: the paediatric section of the Royal Society of Medicine; the Society for the Study of In-born Errors of Metabolism; the Bristol Medico-Chirurgical Society, the Bristol branch of the BMA; the South West Paediatric Club; the Women's Medical Federation; and, of course, the Bristol Medico-Historical Society. She was a founder member of the Neonatal Society and also an Honorary Fellow of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health and of the British Association of Perinatal Medicine.

I should also mention that she gave the first Mary Crosse Memorial Lecture in 1976 following the death of her great friend, Vicki,

some four years earlier. Also, in 2005, as the oldest Fellow present, she gave the Royal College of Physicians' vote of thanks to their President, Carol Black, on her remitting office. Beryl was 95 at the time. Her intellect remained as sharp as ever.

Beryl's achievements on behalf of children and in particular on behalf of the newborn did not go unnoticed. She was hailed both on television and in the press as a pioneer of newborn care in this country. In 1996 the University of Bristol awarded her the Degree of Doctor of Medicine, *honoris causa*, in recognition of her achievements. The University of the West of England also made her an Honorary Doctor of Science. In 2006 Beryl received an OBE from the hands of Prince Charles. Her nieces, Jane and Sally, who accompanied her to Buckingham Palace, have told me that it was a wonderful occasion and a fitting climax to a life devoted to the service of paediatrics and child health. It certainly gave Beryl the greatest pleasure. May she rest in peace. We, for our part, can only rejoice and give thanks for her truly remarkable life.'