The Australian
Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE4790

Pinner, Mancell Gwenneth

(1922 - 1998)

Born	19220624, Melbourne Victoria Australia
Died	19980227, Canberra Australian Capital Territory Australia
Occupation	Radiologist

Summary

Gwen Pinner was a significant figure in the medical profession in Canberra. In addition to her work as a radiologist, she conducted a tuberculosis survey of the Australian Capital Territories and Queanbeyan and was involved in the establishment of the John James Memorial Hospital. As a child, however, it was her role of presenting a bouquet to the Duchess of York at the opening of Parliament House in 1927 that created an enduring image.

Details

Mancell Gwenneth Pinner was born on 24 June 1922 in Melbourne, the eldest daughter of John Thomas Pinner and Mancell Jeanott (née Drysdale). Her father, chief accountant and a member of the Expropriation Board of New Guinea, was in New Guinea at the time of her birth and was stationed there for much of her early childhood. In 1926 the family moved to Canberra where John had been appointed assistant-accountant in the Federal Capital Commission.

Aged four, Gwen was selected from a ballot of some 500 children, to present a bouquet of roses to the Duchess of York at the opening of Parliament House on 9 May 1927. Dressed in a new white frock and bonnet for the occasion, she was accompanied up the steps by Captain J.H. Honeysett, a World War I veteran who lived next door to her family. Although Gwen later recalled little of the day, it was reported that she ‘appeared to feel no embarrassment in the presence of her Royal Highness, and, having carried out her part, skipped gaily across the lawn back to her waiting mother.’

Initially the family lived in Ainslie and Gwen attended Ainslie Public School. Dux in her final year, she was awarded a scholarship to attend the Canberra Church of England Girls’ Grammar School (CCEGGS) in 1934. Three years later the family moved to Deakin where Gwen and her sister, Jean, could walk across the paddocks to the school. At CCEGGS Gwen continued to excel: she captained the Basketball and Tennis teams; won the 1938 Lady Isaacs Prize for the best essay by a school girl; and was School Captain and Dux in her final two years. In 1939 Gwen was awarded a Canberra scholarship by the Canberra University College to assist her studies in medicine at the University of Melbourne. She was one of eight female graduates whose degrees of Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery were conferred in March 1945.

Gwen began working as an intern at the Royal Melbourne Hospital but she contracted tuberculosis and her recovery entailed a year-long stay in hospital and a further year recuperating away from work. It was an experience that probably led to her appointment as head of a survey team examining the incidence of tuberculous infection in the Australian Capital Territory and Queanbeyan for the Commonwealth Department of Health (part of an Australia-wide programme aimed at eradicating tuberculosis). The survey was conducted over several months in 1949 and involved about half the population volunteering to receive a preliminary tuberculin skin test. Tests were conducted in schools, offices, shops, hostels, hotels and at a regular clinic in the old hospital buildings at Acton. In June, Gwen conducted skin tests on Members of Parliament as part of a publicity campaign to encourage participation in the survey. While the incidence of active tuberculosis was low, Gwen believed there was considerable educational value in the survey as it resulted in a population that was ‘tuberculosis conscious’. The next year she conducted a similar survey of 904 people on Norfolk Island.

Gwen returned to the Royal Melbourne Hospital working as an assistant radiologist. She continued to study and was awarded a Diploma of Diagnostic Radiology in 1952. Two years later she became the first woman to be awarded the Thomas Baker Memorial Fellowship to study radiology abroad. Gwen departed in early 1955 for London. During her eighteen months overseas she spent time in several countries including Britain, Sweden, and America. Striving to gain the most benefit from the fellowship, she divided her time between working as an honorary assistant in hospitals; studying short courses; attending seminars and symposiums; and observing doctors.

Gwen returned from abroad to the family home in Canberra and joined Ron Hoy and Bruce Collings at their practice. She also worked as a consultant radiologist at the Royal Canberra Hospital and, over the years, served on various hospital committees. In 1965, Gwen, along with a number of colleagues, founded Canberra’s first private hospital, John James Memorial Hospital. By the 1960s and 1970s she was considered ‘the dominant figure in radiology in Canberra’. Gwen had been elected to the Fellowship of the Faculty of Radiologists (London) in 1957 and to the Fellowship of the College of Radiologists of Australasia in 1964. In 1984 she became the first female President of the Royal Australasian College of Radiologists. She retired in 1987.

In 1988, sixty-one years after presenting the bouquet to the Duchess of York, Gwen attended the opening of the new Parliament House and was presented to Queen Elizabeth.

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http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article16366850

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University of Melbourne Calendar 1946, 1946,
http://repository.unimelb.edu.au/10187/10573

University of Melbourne Calendar 1953, 1953,
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Site Exhibition
From Lady Denman to Katy Gallagher: A Century of Women's Contributions to Canberra, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2013,
http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/ldkg

Archival resources

National Archives of Australia, National Office, Canberra
Royal Visit, May 1927 - The Duchess of York receiving a bouquet from a young girl (Gwen Pinner)

Royal Visit, May 1927 - The Duchess of York receiving a bouquet from Gwen Pinner [Copy photograph]

National Library of Australia, Pictures Collection
Duchess of York receiving flowers from Gwen Pinner at the opening of Parliament House, Canberra, 1927 [picture] / W.J. Mildenhall

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