



EASL Recognition Award Recipient 2019: Prof. Deirdre Kelly

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“Where is the little Irish girl? Let her look after the children”

[Professor Dame Sheila Sherlock]

What would Sheila Sherlock have said today? Would she have foreseen Professor Deirdre Kelly's amazing career, her professional achievements and her impact on the generation of paediatric hepatology? Would she have foreseen how this young girl who was working alongside Andy Burroughs, Howard Thomas and John Summerfield as Wellcome Trust Research Fellow learning about liver disease and basic science would later change the lives of so many children with liver disease? We do not know but it was a wise decision in 1984 to charge her trainee and colleague Deirdre Kelly with the care of those young patients with liver disease who at the time did not have much to expect from medicine. We still have to be grateful for this lasting and far reaching decision, not only because Sheila Sherlock has facilitated an acclaimed career of an international academic clinician and scientist but more so for identifying the needs of the very young end of the spectrum of patients with liver disease. A group of patients that is low in numbers, often suffers from rare disease and has limited treatment options. Sheila Sherlock's decision has contributed to the generation of a new field of medicine, a small but highly specialized niche on the edge between adult and paediatric medicine.

In all her professional life Deirdre Kelly has wandered between these two fields and she has used the best of both to develop her Liver Unit in Birmingham which has been one of the critical points for paediatric hepatology around the world. Deirdre has always been a networker and searched for links between the different fields of medicine, always trying to find the best current management for those young patients without much interest in lobbying either industry or politics.

Born in Calcutta, Deirdre Kelly grew up in India. Deirdre speaks a little Hindi and, based on the stories I have been told from that time, I feel that it was in this period that Deirdre formed her strong sense of leadership, duty and responsibility for the people around her. Deirdre returned to Ireland to boarding school and for her medical training, graduating at Trinity College in Dublin. She has trained in both adult and paediatric gastroenterology and hepatology in Dublin, at the Royal Free Hospital in London with Sheila Sherlock and at Great Ormond



Street. In 1987 she went to Nebraska to work in liver disease and intestinal failure. In 1989 Deirdre was entrusted to set up the new Paediatric Liver Unit in Birmingham, the city that now has the biggest liver transplant programme in Europe.

So why specifically does Deirdre deserve to be recognised for her achievements in the field of liver diseases? It is not only her fascinating personality, her charisma, her sharp intellect and her refreshing communication skills. The impact of her outstanding professional contribution is obvious in clinical medicine, in science, in education and training and in the ground work of networking.

Deirdre has been one of the leading pioneers to develop a standardized guideline based multidisciplinary approach to the diagnosis and management of children with liver disease. She recognised the value of the multidisciplinary team very early on, teaching and empowering nurses and other health professionals, making sure that the child and the family were central to her philosophy and focus.

It is not only her own personal clinical expertise and experience but the systematic approach to clinical challenges that made the difference for the patient. So that the Birmingham Children's Hospital's Liver Unit has become an example for many

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such centres in the world. Deirdre's idea of a paediatric hepatologist as part of a team approach has inspired so many of us.

The range of clinical textbooks Deirdre has edited including her best-selling *Diseases of the Liver and Biliary System in Children* illustrates this role further.

Deirdre has always seen science as inevitable to move clinical medicine forward, science as the cornerstone of cutting-edge innovative treatment options. She has (co-)authored over 200 articles in scientific journals – the last one that comes up on PubMed during the generation of this text is from our *Journal of Hepatology* in November 18: *Epidemiology and natural history of hepatitis C virus infection among children and young people* by Modin *et al.* Deirdre's scientific interest is broad based, ranging from basic science into hepatic stem cells – a field where the two of us met and which brings back fond memories of bench work: So much frustration, the experience of being torn between clinical commitments and the pressure to produce publishable outcomes and Deirdre's persistent and warm support in difficult times, as well as the overwhelming joy when we ended up on the cover of *Hepatology*.

Deirdre has been a deputy editor for the *Journal of Pediatric Gastroenterology and Nutrition* and for *Pediatric Transplantation* and she currently is deputy Editor of *Liver Transplantation*.

Deirdre is an outstanding teacher and she has always had the great ability to make you understand. It is not that all of this happened without a degree of anxiety and sweat amongst the ones being educated. However, there is always much respect

for young trainees and their needs. Deirdre picks you up where you are.

So, taking all of this together what is it that makes Deirdre special? It is probably this ability to connect the dots – to connect the questions and the answers to the bigger picture and to develop this perspective for the greater good. It is this never ever give up attitude and to follow problems up to the very end. Deirdre's ability to bring people together across the continents and across the medical specialties is well documented by her leadership role in medical societies. Deirdre has been President of the European Society of Paediatric Gastroenterology, Hepatology and Nutrition (ESPGHAN) (2006–2010), British Society for Paediatric Gastroenterology, Hepatology and Nutrition (BSPGHAN) (2004–2007) and the International Pediatric Transplant Association (IPTA) (2002–2005).

So what a wonderful token of appreciation here today for a leading paediatric hepatologist in an adult focussed community to be recognised for all the energy and work that has been put into a professional life for children with liver disease. The European Association for the Study of the Liver has proven to be a genuine home for all hepatology and the remarkable step to honour my senior, my teacher, my mentor and my friend Deirdre Kelly for her lifelong attempts/struggle to improve the lives of children with liver disease.

Deirdre has made such a difference for children with liver disease.