

Patricia K Littlejohn BVSc

Pat Littlejohn was the second woman to enrol in the Sydney University faculty of Veterinary Science, in 1931, but the first to graduate, in 1935. She worked as a teacher in Australia, as a veterinary officer and pathologist in Papua New Guinea, and as a pathologist in England. She also brought up a family while accompanying her husband on his postings with the British Colonial Service.

Pat was born on 23 June 1913, spent her childhood in Sydney and was educated at the Ascham School for Girls, matriculating in 1930. She was undoubtedly influenced by her mother, Linda Littlejohn (a noted feminist, broadcaster and tireless worker for women's rights) and by the then headmistress of Ascham, Miss Bailey, to believe that gender should not be a barrier to women wishing to undertake paid employment. Pat believed she was the first of the Ascham girls to wish to do veterinary science, though Ann Flashman, a year ahead of her at School, was actually the first to enrol in the course.

Pat enrolled in the four year course in 1931. During these Depression years, the course was strongly oriented toward the understanding of the anatomy, husbandry, diseases and treatment of horses. The teaching staff, including Professor John Stewart, RMC Gunn, Frank Whitehouse, Joe Drabble, Max Henry, Ian Clunies Ross and Dick Webb were all supportive of the early women undergraduates. Pat passed all her annual exams and graduated on 18 May 1935, a year ahead of Ann Flashman. She was a resident of Womens College throughout her undergraduate years and also played a significant role in the affairs of the University Womens Union – in 1933 becoming the Sports Secretary and organiser of social events and Vice President of the Women Union Sports Association. She also represented the Union on the Students Representative Council.

After her graduation, Pat remained at the School as a Demonstrator in Anatomy – assistant to Dick Webb for three years – during which time she studied and published on the preputial muscles of the pig. She was paid £200 per annum. The teaching position enabled her to remain closely in contact with her fiancé though, due to socio-economic pressure on female graduates in many professions at the time, teaching was the first career option. After graduation Pat remained involved with the Womens Union as coach of the basketball teams.

Marriage to Dr Terry Abbott in 1937 saw the beginning of an international career as his postings with the British Colonial Service took them to Hong Kong, from where they were evacuated back to Australia when the Japanese advanced in the World War II. Subsequently they were posted to Sarawak, Tanzania, the Seychelles and North Borneo, where Pat devoted her time to raising and schooling their daughter and two sons.

In 1956 the family moved to Papua New Guinea where Pat became involved in veterinary work again as a Veterinary Officer with the Department of Agriculture, Stock and Fisheries in the early days of the campaign to eradicate bovine brucellosis and tuberculosis in that country. A growing interest in pathology encouraged Pat to return to her old school for further periods of training, after which she worked as a pathologist at the newly established laboratory at Port Moresby until 1966.

After a sojourn in Greece, Pat was employed as a pathologist for six years at the Glaxo Laboratories at Greenford in England, working on tissue changes associated with veterinary drugs under development. During this time,

their daughter Lyndal had taken up her mother's career choice, graduating from the veterinary school at the University of Queensland in 1963.

The Abbots returned to Australia in 1973, settled at Paterson, New South Wales, for a number of years and finally returned to Sydney. In 1980 Pat was offered a position as part-time Demonstrator in Pathology for the third year students in her old school – a task in which she excelled. While there she enjoyed participating in the 75th anniversary of the Sydney Veterinary School in 1985 – fifty years after she had become its first woman graduate. She retired in 1987, a year after her husband's death, and died in September 1998. Of her own career Pat said it was "not a brilliant record – no post graduate degrees or learned papers, but it was a lot of fun".

References and further reading

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