

“Just doing stuff”

As Dr Kate McClelland celebrates becoming a Fellow of the Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland, NIMR takes a look at the life and career of one of the most enigmatic characters in NI community pharmacy and finds out what the future holds for her.

You only need to chat to Kate McClelland for a few minutes – or, in my case, two and a half enjoyable hours – to be aware of her love for pharmacy. Her enthusiasm is almost tangible and her knowledge of NI pharmacy almost second to none.

Kate is most definitely one of those people who, once you’ve met, you never forget. A veritable whirlwind of energy, drive and activity, she has had her finger in more pies over the years than most.

“I used to ask my youngest son “what did you do today?””, Kate said in her Fellowship acceptance speech, “and he’d say, ‘stuff mummy, I just did stuff’. That, I have to say, was pretty much what I did – I couldn’t say no to anything that sounded interesting!”

Yet, in 1977, Kathryn McClelland - married to Tom at the age of 18, the mother of three young children and starting out as a pharmacy student - could not have expected to have been in the position in which she found herself on the evening of November 25 this year.

“I was really just looking for something to do. My dad said to me ‘You’ve always enjoyed playing doctors and nurses and you loved working in Woolworths when you were fifteen! What about that new course – pharmacy – why don’t you do that?’ It was that simple!

“Up until that point my options had basically been Stewarts or Crazy Prices, but I had got my three A-levels in physics, chemistry and biology, and my results were so good that, when I went to Queen’s

to do the four-year course, I was fast tracked and completed it in three.”

(Kate was in good company during those years, as the Class of ‘80 also produced PSNI Registrar, Brendan Kerr and high-profile local pharmacist, Terry Maguire, to name but two.)

Needless to say, Kate was no ordinary student! With three small children in tow, she rarely found time to join in the traditional social life enjoyed by so many university students. On gaining her degree, she followed this up with a PhD on the development of a local anaesthetic cream for children: Ametop. Kate being Kate, of course, still found time to have her fourth child halfway through the course!

“I had to encourage volunteers to let me put this cream on to their arms and stick needles in,” she laughs. “It’s amazing that they let me do it! Dr Victor Boston was the prime mover at the time – he was really pushing for the cream as he was a Paediatric Oncologist and had to give injections to many children. Research had shown that the thing that children feared most about hospital was the needle, so he desperately wanted to do something to overcome this fear. I had my own four children, so I really could relate to the problem.”

After gaining her PhD, Kate left university and spent six months as a pre-reg with Joshua Kerr, whose pharmacy was within walking distance of Kate’s childminder. Joshua Kerr didn’t actually want a pre-reg, but, with the usual McClelland encouragement, he soon saw the light!

“I spent the time with him discussing his first love - pharmacy politics - but I saw no opportunity to join any of the organisations and certainly not to be

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Dr Kate McClelland



elected onto the Council.

"In 1980, when I graduated, I faced a twelve-month pre-reg", Kate continued, "but the idea of working from 9am to 6pm was never an option for me. My husband, Tom, was working long hours too, but the fact that I had worked hard for my finals to get my PhD meant that that counted as six months of my pre-reg time, so that worked well.

"As with so many women at that time, the kids had to come first. I came from a generation of women, who followed their husband's career. At one stage I thought I would never have a career in pharmacy, but I didn't regret it."

Kate's origins actually lie in Bradford in West Yorkshire, but she moved to Northern Ireland at sixteen due to her father's work.

"My mother-in-law actually came from Winnipeg in Canada when she was sixteen too, and I was always conscious of the culture shock that that was for her. I went to Bradford Girls Grammar School in the mid-60s, and it was still very much teaching girls to be mill managers' wives. We learned to starch shirts, cook and set the table. When you look back on it, you can see what they were trying to do – that's the way it was at the time. Needless to say, we had

no contact with the boys' school."

(It is perhaps somewhat ironic that the formidable firebrand, Barbara Castle, was an ex-pupil of the same school!) At sixteen Kate began at Methodist College, Belfast, where she studied the three sciences.

"I was really happy at Methody. I was earmarked for medicine, but, at 17, I knew that it wasn't for me. Ironically, last year, I did a course through EU to train to administer vaccines. At the end I put it into my CPD and wrote "now trained but never will. This is why I didn't do medicine!"

"Some time ago, I received two letters on the same day from the Society. One was a warm invitation to the Fellowship Dinner and the second was from the CPD assessor to say that I had failed. I was immediately reminded of that famous line from Kipling, 'If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster, And treat those two impostors just the same'. It was a perfect case of sic transit Gloria (Fame is fleeting). I had to accept a Fellowship and mentoring with the same humility!"

By the end of her six-month pre-reg stint Kate had already got a part-time job lecturing to students

in BIFHE, training technicians, but in her heart of hearts, she knew that what she wanted to do was run her own pharmacy.

"I had come to realise very early on that I really liked the interaction with customers and the independence, but limited contracts were brought in in 1984 and there were to be no new contracts. A lot of pharmacies had opened and many new contracts had been given when it was announced. I knew that Donald Moore had got the contract for Waringstown in 1991 so I went and spoke to him. He advised me to 'put in a good case' and told me that there was a possibility that, with a really strong case, there was a chance I might get a contract if I could find somewhere suitable.

"One day, as I drove through Maghaberry – I was actually furious because I couldn't find it! – I saw a row of four shops, two of which were empty. I knew that this was where I wanted to be. Luckily for me, nobody opposed my application. Although the village had been deemed too small for a pharmacy, the postmistress had said that the village needed one, so she and I got together a petition from the villagers and she came with me to lodge the application. Some of the older villagers have been loyal supporters of the pharmacy; they know what it was like to live here when there was no health service at all.

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Maghaberry Pharmacy opened in 1993 and, within four years, it had been awarded 'Best Independent Pharmacy of the Year', putting both the pharmacy and the village on the map. As there is no surgery in the village, Kate and her team have built relationships with all of the local doctors' practices. In addition, working with the Community Association, the pharmacy was instrumental in starting the 'Friday Morning Club' with funding from BCPP and other groups that meet in the village with health and social care as their core values.

Kate's days are long and varied. In addition to her dispensing, she is often called on as the 'first port of call' for emergencies.

"A young girl hopped in one summer with a piece of glass in her foot. She had no one to take her to a hospital or GP practice. I had a pair of tweezers and took it out. I know that I shouldn't have done it, but what would you do?"

"I'm blessed by being surrounded by my brilliant team in the pharmacy – Sandra Storey, Amanda Sherry and Lee Hobson. They are such an enthusiastic team, who pull together and look after their 'half a job director'. Bit by bit they're teaching me to say 'no'."

From a professional point of view, Kate's achievements have been many and varied. In 1996 she became Chair of Pharmacy Practice Council before becoming Vice-President in 2001 and President in 2003. From 2005/09, she represented the PSNI on the Council of Healthcare Regulatory

Excellence and, during the same period, also served on the Pharmaceutical Group of the European Union, becoming Head of the UK delegation in 2008.

As a member of PSNI council for fourteen years, Kate has served through many difficult and trying periods. In 2005, however, she faced a personal challenge when she was diagnosed with breast cancer; again, the indomitable McClelland spirit was to win the day and she continues to enjoy good health.

On Thursday 25 November 2010 the Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland honoured Kate by conferring on her the honour of being a fellow of the Society.

In a citation given by Raymond Anderson, Past President of the Pharmaceutical Society of NI, Kate's enormous contribution to pharmacy, both as a community practitioner and as an active advocate for the pharmacy profession was highlighted.

"Kate is first and foremost a community



pharmacist," he said, "yet a community pharmacist with a passion for the profession. Her passion and drive are incredible and a shining example to all."

So, what does the future hold for Kate – and for pharmacy in general?

"We really don't know where the profession is going. Capital investment has sought the most efficient supply function and independents are being frozen out. I really hope that the new professional forum will support employee pharmacists. We're only as good as what we did in the last minute. Where we are going is the challenge and the exciting 'stuff'."

"I would strongly advise all the young pharmacists to say yes – you just never know where a 'yes' will take you and it will probably be outside any box you ever imagined you might live or work in."

When it comes to "outside the box", there's no doubt that the Dr McClelland knows exactly what she's talking about.

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Raymond Anderson