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TREVOR R. PARMENTER

The University of Sydney, Australia

It is extremely difficult to write a eulogy for the late Alan Clarke without mentioning his wife and colleague, Ann. Since their undergraduate days at Reading University, UK, where they both took first class honours degrees in psychology, their professional lives were closely intertwined. PhDs followed at the Institute of Psychiatry at Maudsley Hospital within Hans Eysneck’s Psychology Department.

Following their marriage in 1950, both took psychologist positions at Manor Hospital, an institution catering for 1,400 legally detained inmates classified as “mental defectives.” Alan recounted how they were both treated with a mixture of polite disdain, suspicion and, at times, hostility by fellow staff. Psychological testing revealed the surprising results that many of the patients showed remarkable improvement in intellectual skills and scholastic tasks after one year. This finding, and research initially pioneered by Jack Tizard, demonstrating the benefits of one-to-one training for people with severe intellectual impairments, was to have a profound effect upon the themes of the Clarke’s lifelong research and advocacy for people with intellectual disability.

They challenged the conventional wisdom of the critical period early intervention hypothesis promulgated by Bowlby and others, leading to the publication of Early Experience: Myth and Evidence in 1976 and the 2003 book, Human Resilience: A Fifty Year Quest. Their research also questioned the then firmly held view that very low intelligence precluded any hope of improvements in functioning.

These developments set the scene for the de-medicalisation of what was then referred to as “mental deficiency.” The publication in 1958 of their research-based book, Mental Deficiency: The Changing Outlook, and the subsequent three editions, had a profound impact upon theory, policy, and practice in the field of intellectual disability internationally.

In 1962, Alan was appointed to a Chair in Psychology at Hull University, where he subsequently became Dean of Science and Pro Vice Chancellor. In his time at Hull, he was noted for his unswerving support for his students and his deep commitment to integrity in research, exemplified by his role in exposing the late Sir Cyril Burt’s fraudulent research data reported in his twin studies.

In 1967, one of the highlights of his early academic career was the invitation to deliver the 42nd Maudsley Lecture before the Royal College of Psychiatrists, the first given by a non-medically qualified researcher. In this address Alan presented the controversial view that early experience did not by itself predetermine a child’s future.

In the early 1960s, Alan played a significant role in the formation of the International Association for the Scientific Study of Mental Deficiency (now IASSID), becoming its first secretary, fourth president, and the singular honour of being appointed honorary life president. In recognition of the Clarke’s contribution to science in the field of intellectual disability, the first keynote address to each IASSID World Congress has been named in their honour.

In his insightful history of the Association (found on the IASSID website), Alan suggested that a number of factors had accelerated scientific inquiry in our field in the post–World War II years. These included the spirit of optimism and humanism which encouraged people to be more aware of disadvantage and to seek preventive or remedial measures, as well as the widespread belief that scientific methodology had much to offer.

Alan also provided early leadership in helping to bridge the gap between the medical and non-medical research communities in the field of intellectual disability. In this respect, he forged the lasting relationship between the Association and the World Health Organization.

In his presidential observations to the 1976 Congress held in Washington, DC, Alan lamented that the gap between research and practice, especially in helping to increase the functionality of people with intellectual disability, was “extremely bad.”

During the 1970s, Alan was president of the British Psychological Society and editor of the British Journal of Psychology. He was awarded a CBE in 1974 and appointed an honorary Fellow of the Royal College of Psychiatry in 1989.

Alan will be remembered for his deep commitment to those less fortunate, his passion for sound research, and above all his humility. Our field has truly lost one of the most forward thinking scientists who helped to transform the way society perceives people with intellectual disability. He is survived by his wife, Ann, and sons, Bob and Peter.