

OBITUARY

Sharon Whelan

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Sharon was born in London England in 1948. After completing an Arts degree at Sussex University, she trained as a secretary, and it was in this capacity that she was recruited to join the young International Agency for Research on Cancer in 1974

At IARC, her first long term appointment was working as secretarial assistant to Dr Callum Muir. Dr Muir, one of the founding scientific staff of IARC, was head of what became known as the Descriptive Epidemiology Programme (DEP), and in his professional work, collecting and analysing cancer data from around the world, and especially from cancer registries, relied upon the assistance of his small staff, including Sharon. Recognising her capacities in analysis of epidemiological data, he encouraged her to join the MSc programme in Epidemiology and Public Health at the University of Birmingham, where she was supervised by Dr John Waterhouse and Ms Jean Powell. Sharon graduated in 1982.

When she returned to IARC, Sharon joined the scientific staff of DEP, and worked under the supervision of Dr Callum Muir (1981-1986) and then Dr Max Parkin (1986-2004) until her retirement in 2005. Although she worked on several projects – including a major editorial input to the International Classification of Diseases for Oncology (ICD-O), Sharon will be best remembered for two major roles, and contributions.

The first is the Cancer Incidence in Five Continents series. This became an IARC-led project with Volume II, published in 1971. Sharon worked with Dr Muir as secretarial assistant on Volume III, and took a more

direct contributory role in Volume IV (recognised as “In collaboration with...” among the Editorial team, co-authoring the chapter on “Coding Procedures” which was a synthesis of a survey (by questionnaire) of the practices of all the contributors. From Volume V (1987) (see Figure 1) to Volume VIII (2002), Sharon was co-editor, and contributor (notably to the sections on classification and coding), but more than this, was responsible for the whole process of production, from invitations to contributors, through managing the editorial process, to assembling the finished product for publication. Her skill and professionalism – as well as meticulous attention to detail (and the quality of the English) - might have been taken for granted by the many scientific users of these volumes, but not by those who worked with her; her professionalism was thrown into relief by the disastrous first printing of Volume IX, produced without her input in 2008, which had to be withdrawn, re-edited, and reprinted.

Sharon’s second major contribution was as the person responsible for the successful operation of the International Association of Cancer Registries (IACR). Although the IACR was founded in 1967 it was a relatively informal organism until 1972, when the senior officers agreed that the Association be physically located at IARC, and that the day to day business would be managed by the

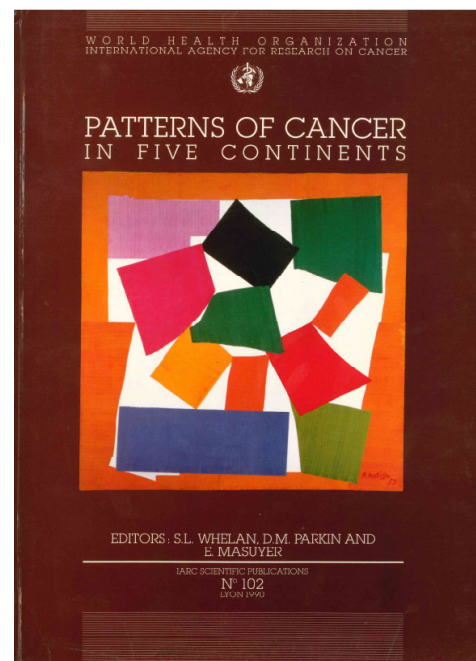


Figure 1. Patterns of Cancer in Five Continents : Volume V

Max Parkin

head of Descriptive Epidemiology (Dr Muir). This role mutated to become “Deputy Secretary” then “Executive Secretary”, but, whoever held that post (Dr Muir until 1986, Dr Parkin 1986-2004), the actual work of running the Association was undertaken by Sharon, who herself became Executive Secretary in 2004-2005. Sharon was responsible for everything – the membership, the budget, and the publications and, of course, the Annual Meeting, which she organised every year, working with one of the member registries worldwide to host what was recognised not only as a scientific forum, but an occasion for the cancer registry family to meet and exchange experience and friendship.

No one had given as much, and knew as much about IACR as Sharon, and after her retirement she was persuaded, before those valuable memories were lost, to commit them to a short history of the Association, from its beginnings in the 1960’s, to 2010 (see Figure 2). It is a mine of information, carefully and impeccably written, and, typically, not at all acknowledging the vital role that Sharon herself had played in making the Association a success.

In her personal life, Sharon maintained a close connection with friends inside and outside of IARC, sharing her flat in Ecully, and then in rue Dunois first with her son Ben, and later with just her cats. Although like most IARC professionals, Sharon maintained a “home base” in UK, her visits there dwindled to regular visits to her sister, and, after retirement, she elected to remain in Lyon, where her son was working, had married, and was

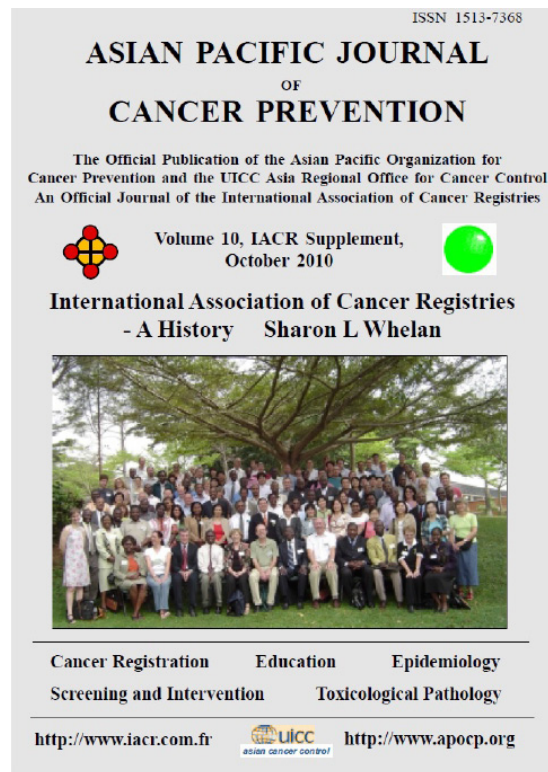


Figure 2. History of the IACR

later to present her with two grandsons

Sharon was not only a valued colleague to many of us at IARC, but a close friend, with a warm and relaxed welcome to all who knew her. She will be greatly missed.

Max Parkin

London, April 2016