W.O.G.S. Obituary for Bill Clow

William ("Bill") Menzies Clow, formerly Consultant Obstetrican and Gynaecologist at Withybusb Hospital, Haverfordwest and latterly Whakatane Hospital, New Zealand, and former President of the Welsh Obstetrical and Gynaecological Society, was born in 1941, and died in November 2014 of lymphoma.

Bill’s early life was surprisingly colourful. Born during World War 2 to Scottish medical missionary parents, who were running a hospital in Sian in China, this was a classic example of the Chinese proverb, “May you live in interesting times”.

The family had 2 older children. In what must have been an incredibly stressful time for their parents, the boarding school in China which they attended was overrun by the Japanese. Propaganda did not lead their parents to expect that the children would be well-treated, as it eventually turned out that they were – the Japanese treated children well, and retired soldiers were placed in the school to run it. No-one knew if the children would ever be seen again. The senior Clows embarked on a second family. Dr Elizabeth Clow, Bill’s mother was looked after by the staff she herself had trained. First a son was born, then later a further son, followed by Bill as his undiagnosed second twin.

When the twins were 18 months old, the Japanese invasion reached Sian. Bill’s mother with the 3 tiny children fled across the Yellow River to India and thence to the UK. Bill’s father, Dr Menzies Clow, remained behind in China, determined not to abandon the hospital and had to join the British military in order to be allowed to do so. At the end of the war, Bill and his brothers met their repatriated older siblings for the first time. The older children then remained in boarding school in England while Bill’s mother took the small children back to Sian, where they attended a Canadian school. Bill’s mother, by all accounts, was a remarkable woman. Apart from her medical achievements, she counted mountaineering and concert-standard piano-playing amongst her achievements, though travelling around war-torn Asia with 3 toddlers single-handed probably outstrips everything else!

Three years later, the Communist revolution forced mother and children to leave China again, travelling back to the UK via Hong Kong. It was not until 1952 that Bill’s father returned from China. The senior Clows, although surgically inclined, set up in general practice in Lincolnshire.

The twins followed their parent’s footsteps into medicine. A proud Scot, Bill trained at Edinburgh University, followed by house jobs in Bangour, where he met his wife Elspeth, who was working there as a staff nurse. After SHO posts elsewhere around Edinburgh, Bill returned to Bangour as O&G registrar, and during this time he and Elspeth were married.

A Registrar appointment took them to Manchester, for 8 years. Bill worked first as Clinical Tutor, doing Urogynaecological research, then as Senior Registrar on rotation, working for Patrick Steptoe the year before Louise Brown, the first test tube baby, was born.
In 1977, coming to the end of his time as senior registrar, Bill’s search for a consultant post brought him to Wales, where he initially competed with local boy Peter Bowen Simpkins for a post in Swansea, before joining Tony (JAK) Davies, an acquaintance from the Simpson Club, at the soon to be opened Withybush Hospital, where they shared an enthusiasm for developing an excellent service including a new colposcopy service, a project dear to Bill’s heart. The early days of the partnership with Tony saw the Raise a Laser Fund, amongst other initiatives. This was the first of many innovations introduced by the gadget-minded Bill, a consummate early-adopter. He was in the forefront of persuading the more pliable, pre-21st century, management to put money into introducing innovations and services, such as Loop Diathermy, Early Pregnancy Assessment Unit, Outpatient Hysteroscopy, and K2 provision for all staff, ahead of many bigger units in Wales.

Bill remained as consultant at Withybush, assuming the roles of College Tutor, Clinical Lead and Colposcopy lead at various times, until 2006, when he retired from the NHS. He was delighted to relate that he was replaced by 3 people. However, after initially enjoying the extended holiday at the outset of his retirement, the lure of golf and photography wore off, and he found that he missed Obstetrics and Gynaecology. Free of the ever-encroaching pressures of administration and cost-saving pressures within the NHS, he embarked on a second career in New Zealand, where he worked in various hospitals, most recently Whakatane Hospital near the tropical north east coast of the North Island, which serves a high percentage of the indigenous Maori population. He renewed his interest in research, and was hoping to be well enough just before his death to attend a conference at Oxford where the pathologist with whom he collaborated in New Zealand was presenting their findings.

He remained in New Zealand until 2014, when a recurrence of the lymphoma which he had previously been treated for between New Zealand and Haverfordwest prompted his return to the UK.

Bill always had a strong interest in training junior medical staff, and maintained links with doctors who had worked in the department from overseas, including Ghana, Sri Lanka, Botswana, Germany, India and Nigeria. Only yesterday, I received a letter from Dr Kalinga Nanyakkara of Sri Lanka, enclosing an Appreciation which he has had published in the newsletter of the Sri Lankan College of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, of which I would like to read you a short extract;

“My apprehension and trepidation in arriving at a foreign country, especially on Halloween, quickly disappeared being welcomed like a long-lost protégé by this big man. Although we have had much “cutting experience” back at home, Bill showed us the humane side of a doctor, being compassionate, efficient and truthful to the patients. He was my mentor and my guru, having moulded my life, being the person who had the most professional influence in my career.”

Bill also trained others who have gone on to become GPs and O&G consultants, both locally and nationally, for whom he was known to go the extra mile in helping with placements and training.

The Presbyterian Church played a large part in Bill’s life. He was ordained as an elder of the Church of Scotland in 1970 and was an elder at his Church in Haverfordwest for many years, working closely with the pastors of that and other churches where the
church impacted on the daily life of the hospital, before the days of increasing secularisation. He continued with church charity work in New Zealand.

He strongly supported medical work in less developed countries, perhaps with echoes of his parents work in China, and was instrumental in setting up charitable status for the Friends of Living Hope Hospital in Nigeria, run by Thomas Odejide, whom some of you will know. In New Zealand he became involved in supporting an outlying Maori village to refurbish a community hall to double as a health facility for antenatal care.

Singing with the Haverfordwest Male Voice Choir was an abiding passion over the years. Indeed, Bill was trapped in Canada with the choir on tour at the time of 9/11. He also joined three choirs in New Zealand, a church choir, town choir and the New Zealand national choir.

Bill has always been strongly appreciated by his patients. No patient ever felt that she had less than Bill’s whole undivided attention, and he had all the time in the world to talk to her, sometimes to the exasperation of his clinic staff. Tony Davies, in giving an eulogy at his funeral mentioned that he operated on Clow time, which was more elastic than everyone else’s. You didn’t want to be running an afternoon clinic after his morning clinic! The appreciation of the patients culminated in the awarding of medals for services to patients during the 2 year Unsung Heroes Campaign run by a national UK network of local newspapers. Bill was the only hospital doctor in Wales to receive a silver medal in 1991 and a bronze medal in 1992.

As a colleague, he was never anything other than entirely supportive; from the outset, when I came for interview for my post, he had also arranged an interview for my non-medical husband, and proceeded to organise accommodation for us when the hospital didn’t have any married accommodation vacant. He was a good friend and colleague, on whom you could always depend in a crisis, whether medical or personal.

Bill is survived by his wife, Elspeth, their 3 sons and many grandchildren, his twin, David, an older brother, and numerous nephews and nieces, 2 of whom are doctors.