And what a life! A former EONS Board member, Dr Shelley Dolan is no stranger to receiving prestigious honours, having been awarded the European Society of Intensive Care Medicine Award of Merit for ICU Nursing and an EMBT Nursing Prize for European Haematology Nursing. Her contribution to the development of cancer nursing in numerous countries even landed her the Serbian People’s Medal for Cancer Nursing. However, she remains firmly rooted in her job. “I am first and foremost a nurse” was her first comment after she received the reward.

Exuding an infectious passion for oncology nursing, Shelley recalls with pride her early years when she first stumbled across the Royal Marsden, a leading London specialist cancer hospital, “almost by accident as I was doing a shift there.”

“My love of nursing was first about critical care,” she reminisces. “As soon as I started working in London, in the third year of my training, I did a placement in intensive care and loved it. I discovered how in intensive care you give a lot of attention to the whole needs of one patient and their family, because you have only one person you are looking after at any one time.”
It is important that nursing is respected for the huge diversity and extent of talent, says Shelley Dolan. Working with cancer patients she found particularly rewarding, she says. “I was struck by the way doctors and nurses talked to patients very openly about cancer. I had never really met that before. I was also struck by how young the patients in cancer care were and how involved the patients and their families were in knowing about the disease and how expert patients were about their own disease.”

The arduous effort it took to finish her PhD, at the University of Wales, she recalls with less enthusiasm, though she says the experience made her conquer her indiscipline and understand better the self-control and organisation necessary to work and study at the same time. She could not have done it, she says, without formidable support from supervisors such as Professor Jessica Corner. This is why initiatives like the Health Service Research programme run at the Royal Marsden are so valuable, says Shelley, who adds that the programme leader, Dr Theresa Wiseman, has played a key role in ensuring that nurses and junior doctors do their MScs and then their PhDs.

For more than two decades, Shelley has inspired countless nurses to strive for better care of people with cancer and their families. She has devoted years of her life to spotting new talent and encouraging young nurses and junior doctors to think about cancer as a specialty. Shelley has often been described as an inspiring and transformational nurse leader, who is redefining the legacy of Robert Tiffany – a pioneer of specialist cancer nursing who was also based at the Marsden. However, she has learned to lead from the back. “You have to prove your credibility and earn respect,” she says. “It is important that nursing is respected for the huge diversity and extent of talent.”

And when given half a chance, as she was at the Royal Marsden, she goes for it. Shelley helped open the largest Critical Care Unit for cancer patients in the UK when she was a Nurse Consultant in Critical Care, and set up the London Post-Doctoral Cancer Research Forum with Professor Alison Richardson. She is now playing a key part in transforming cancer services in London and the wider UK, in her role as associate clinical director at the London Cancer Alliance – a new organisation launched in 2011, whose main aim is to ensure that hospitals work together across London to improve outcomes by raising the quality of care.

It is at huge gatherings like the Amsterdam European Cancer Congress that Shelley feels in her element. “It is so impressive to see these people from all over Europe, a massive wealth of talent, passion and commitment to each other that dates back years and years,” she enthuses. “They may be different culturally, coming from so many countries with distinct traditions of nursing, but a setting like this congress shows what doctors and nurses working alongside each other have achieved across Europe.”

To all of them she offers the following advice: “Take your thoughts seriously; see where the gaps are in practice, and see what patients or families are telling you to try to fill the gaps; work with others on research. You are not alone. With internet technology you can read research all the time. Also have fun, because the nursing community is great fun.”

Shelley was honoured by EONS for her unstinting contribution to cancer nursing that spans three decades. In her acceptance speech she paid tribute to the support of her friends and family, which made it possible for her to put so much into her work while also bringing up two lovely children. “I have so much fun coming home after a busy day and hugging my five-year-old,” she says. “Having the energy to do what we do everyday in our professional life is hugely important and family life has been my everlasting source of strength.”