Determined pioneer recognised for her work to put a new speciality ‘on the map’

Sam Smith, head of Nursing and Clinical Services for Teenage Cancer Trust, received the EONS Lifetime Achievement Award at the European Cancer Congress in Vienna.

Interview by Jim Boumelha

For more than 20 years, Sam Smith has been arguing the case for teenage cancer patients to be treated by specialist services in special units. But when EONS announced her unceasing efforts have earned her a Life Time Achievement Award, she found herself lost for words. She soon recovered her voice, however, to tell her story: “It was a specialty which did not exist, as all teenage people were either in children’s care or in adult care. As a staff nurse, I used to go around the wards trying to find out where the young people were, tell them about our services, our units and try to win the hearts and minds of consultants.”

Sam recalls where it all started. A group of women working in the field met a mother whose 13-year-old son had cancer and was being treated both in a children’s ward and alongside older people in an adult oncology ward. Not only was he facing the trauma of cancer and cancer treatment, but he was isolated from other young people going through the same thing.

Teenage Cancer Trust grew out of the dedication and passion of that group (which included the trust’s life president and founder Myrna Whiteson MBE) who set out to provide a ‘teenage environment’ to help young people with cancer and raised the £330,000 needed to fund it. On 22 November 1990, Teenage Cancer Trust’s first specialist cancer unit at the Middlesex Hospital in London was officially opened.

Sam herself has a life-long attachment to Manchester, where she trained as paediatric nurse, and her interest in
she remains fully committed to her team, the “movement” that brought about the change. She highlighted the work of close colleagues and the teamwork, which achieved the setting up of special units all over the country, now numbering 28. “I am just humbled to get this awarded but it’s one for team… I would say it’s bigger than me and what this means is that we are finally on the map.”

Sam has told her colleagues and her family – mum, husband and children about the award – but she did not expect too much jubilation. “Hey, they don’t work in my world! One of my sons is quite busy having just gone to university and my younger one is playing a really important football match today, so that’s more important for him than this!”

Sam is looking further afield to increase the impact of her pioneering work, which has now spread internationally and is recognised in many countries. She is putting a tremendous effort into organising the first global congress next December in Edinburgh, Scotland. Making an impassioned call for everybody to join in, Sam said “We’re not that lone voice that we were 25 years ago and we are much more seen as leaders internationally in this field. I am putting the programme together. Speakers coming from all over the world are interested in taking this up. It’s really exciting.”

cancer care blossomed at Manchester’s Christie Hospital, one of Europe’s leading cancer centres. She worked there on the paediatric cancer ward, and she could see that teenagers under her watch were out of place. The charity got involved and set up the UK’s second teenager cancer unit. But Sam soon realised that this was just the beginning. “I was a staff nurse at the time and we had a lovely teenage unit with no patients in it,” she said.

She recalls the early pioneers, like professor Tim Eden, who not only negotiated with the Trust to build the unit at the hospital, but began to define and develop the whole specialist service. “It was a movement that happened between professionals getting together and, once young people came to the unit, we realised how different they were, so this is where the specialty came from,” she said.

For Sam and her colleagues it became crucial that the specialism was recognised and on the map. She recalls having all these young people in their care. “They complete chemotherapy and it’s the end of treatment but then they came back, struggling to cope. That’s when we realised that young people, young adults at the time, needed specialist support and treatment.”

“One the one hand, cancer is the same disease across ages, but actually on the other it’s not – in young people it’s complex because you see late onset of paediatric tumours and early onset of typically adult tumours. You get the whole spectrum.” Although there were some tumours that are very specific to teenagers – Hodgkin’s lymphoma for example – it has taken many years to figure out that, in leukaemia, teenagers and young adults are actually better off with paediatric protocols than adult protocols, so there are some disease-specific elements that are unique. “But the main issue,” she adds, “is that in that gap between children and adults the needs are very different, so it’s just getting that independence, that sense of control; they may be moving on to work, developing social relationships, developing sexual relationships – so they are in total transition.”

Although the EONS award was recognition of Sam’s personal achievement,