

MARGARET AGNES DUNCOMBE MBE (1912-2005)

SI East Grinstead

If ever you have been grateful for daily unrestricted visiting to see a sick child in hospital, you have to thank Margaret Duncombe MBE.

Born in Vienna in 1912, Margaret made up her mind to be a nurse at the age of three. However, due to parental opposition, she went into teaching and ran her own kindergarten, as well as helping in an after-school club.

Having been interviewed by the Nazis, the family decided that she should move to England shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War. To conceal jewellery and gold coins, her mother sewed them into sanitary wear!

In 1942 Margaret completed her general nursing training at Guys Hospital, and after qualifying as a paediatric nurse at Great Ormond Street she returned to Guys in 1944, as Sister in charge of the children's ward. Whilst there, she took a short break to undertake her midwifery training in Cambridge.

From 1954–1960 she was appointed Lady Superintendent of Nurses (Matron) at the Evelina Children's Hospital, which was associated with Guys.

After serving on a number of paediatric committees, Margaret became Chair and President of the Association of British Paediatric Nurses, which she represented at the International Council for Nurses Congresses in Rome, Frankfurt, Bucharest and Montreal. Her book on Paediatric Nursing was published in 1954 with 7 further editions being issued. She also found time to be an examiner for the General Nursing Council.

As Paediatric Nursing Adviser to the Ministry of Health, Margaret worked tirelessly to change the prevailing practice to allow free daily unrestricted visiting in children's wards. For this successful initiative she became well known and always maintained that it was the proudest achievement of her professional career.

In 1960 she was appointed Matron of the renowned Queen Victoria Hospital in East Grinstead, which was made famous by Archibald McIndoe, who pioneered the treatment and rehabilitation of badly burned aircrew, who became known as "The Guinea Pigs". Throughout her 15 years in charge, Margaret ran a tight ship, taking care of the patients with great empathy and dedication. She was instrumental in opening the children's "Peanut" ward, with a private a room for parents to stay with their child.



After she retired in 1972, as the last traditional Matron, Margaret was awarded an MBE for her services to Paediatric Nursing. In her honour, in 2003 a women's surgical ward was named after her at the QVH. As a founder member of the East Grinstead Branch of Save the Children in September 1975, she raised funds and awareness of the charity's international work, becoming Honorary President in 1990.

SI East Grinstead was formed in 1962 and Margaret joined soon after to become a valued member, writing the history of the club in 1982. With a bright sparkle in her blue eyes, she had an acute sense of humour and a mischievous chuckle. Always alert, interested and compassionate, she was a true Soroptimist.