Joan Forrest Gardner DPhil (Oxon), AO
16-6-1918 – 19-11-2013

JRL Forsyth, Mary Maslen, Rosemary Davidson and Margaret M Peel

Dr Joan Forrest Gardner was born in Melbourne on 16 June 1918, the only daughter of Dr John (Jack) Forrest Gardner and Dr Hilda Josephine Gardner. Her mother was an older sister of Sir Howard Florey, the famed developer of penicillin. Joan’s early life was beset by tragedy as her father died from tetanus after a car accident when she was 10 years of age and her only brother died six years later from a mastoid infection. Her mother then joined the staff of the Melbourne Hospital (now Royal Melbourne Hospital) where she became bacteriologist and serologist. Dr Hilda Gardner was a distinguished and effective professional, who set a high standard for her daughter to follow.

Joan was educated, first at Tintern Girls School (1929–1936), and then at The University of Melbourne as a resident student at Janet Clarke Hall. She graduated BSc (1940), and MSc (1941), in bacteriology and biochemistry. She gained honours in six of 10 undergraduate courses and honours again in her fourth year examination. In addition, she achieved honours in Chemistry III taken as a single subject. She also received a part-time research scholarship in biochemistry and, from 1941 to 1946, investigated enzymes in wheat flour in that department. While she was at The University of Melbourne Joan started bushwalking which, for bushwalks on Wilsons Promontory, involved first riding a horse from Yanakie to the original old Chalet at Darby River.

After the war and when transport allowed, Joan went up to Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford, (1947–1949). She worked at the Sir William Dunn School of Pathology, at which her uncle, Sir Howard Florey, held the chair. In 1949 she graduated D Phil (Oxon) for her work on antimicrobial agents. Her interest in the sterilisation of medical equipment was also kindled during this period.

Joan returned to Australia as a research fellow in the, then, Department of Bacteriology at The University of Melbourne in 1951. Until 1958 she worked in the field of citric acid fermentation. She was appointed Lecturer in 1954 and Senior Lecturer in 1958. Sydney Rubbo, who had succeeded to the chair of the department in 1944, became interested in the problem of hospital cross infection. This led to work on sterilisation and infection control and, from 1959, Joan became a vital and practical support in this area of study. While Rubbo was taking sabbatical leave, Joan prepared comprehensive teaching notes on the topic. When Rubbo returned, these notes were the foundation of a collaborative work: Rubbo SD, Gardner JF, A review of sterilization and disinfection as applied to medical, industrial and laboratory practice, London: Lloyd Luke; 1965.

Joan was naturally reserved and unassuming but she flourished in the stimulating and productive environment engendered by the outgoing, charismatic and dynamic Sydney Rubbo, as did her academic colleagues. For the rest of her professional career, Joan worked and taught in the field of sterilisation, disinfection and infection control, a specialty that requires knowledge of physics, chemistry and the principles of chemical engineering, as well as microbiology. She developed a formidable expertise that earned her the respect of colleagues in Australia and abroad.

Joan foresaw the need to train all those involved in the whole chain of action in the delivery of sterile medical equipment of various kinds. For example, she considered it essential that every person who operated a pressure steam steriliser was fully trained in its correct functioning so that errors could be avoided. She was involved in the gestation of the Central Sterile Supply Departments in hospitals in Victoria and the training of their staff. Joan collaborated with Sister Mary Felix Thornburn AM of the Sisters of Charity of Australia in raising standards for sterile supplies and infection control procedures in Operating Rooms. She stimulated the foundation of advanced training courses for infection control nurses at Mayfield Centre, and participated in the teaching. These courses still continue.

As a member of various committees of Standards Australia, Joan contributed to the preparation and updating of standards for sterilisers and related hospital equipment. She was a joint founder, and later an Honorary Life Member, of the Sterilization and Disinfection Society Victoria (now Sterilizing Research Advisory Council of Australia).
Joan was a conscientious university teacher of her specialty to the four faculties of Medicine, Dentistry, Science and Agricultural Science. She also taught mycology to medical students. Joan was a competent photographer and prepared slides for lectures and presentations for herself and others. In this, and in many other ways, Joan was kind, generous and helpful.

In collaboration with Dr Margaret Peel, Joan wrote three editions of a new book on sterilisation, disinfection and infection control, the first of which was published in 1986. The third edition: Joan F Gardner, Margaret M Peel, Sterilization, disinfection and infection control, London: Churchill Livingstone; 1998 is still in demand, including by chemical engineers.

In recognition of her substantial contributions over many years, Joan received an Order of Australia award (AO) in 1992 for service to medicine in the field of sterilisation, disinfection and infection control.

In addition to commitment to her area of professional expertise, Joan had other major interests. She belonged to the Handknitters Guild and produced beautiful and complex knitted garments, many of which she gave to friends. These works are treasured by the recipients. Less expected was Joan’s great interest in, and in-depth knowledge of, the rigging and sails of different types of sailing ships. As a child, she liked to go to the docks and watch the movement of the ships in and out of the Port of Melbourne. She was a friend of the late Master Mariner, Alan John Villiers; adventurer, author and an expert in the sailing of diverse, exotic, and even primitive vessels. Joan enjoyed attending social functions at the University House staff club and entertaining her friends, family and neighbours in her elegant Parkville home.

Joan died peacefully after a long illness on 19th November 2013. Her legacy would extend to a great many others in the community, unknown and unknowing, who have been beneficiaries of the contributions of Joan Gardner to infection control.