

Diana Edwards (nee Montgomery)

Home was in Christchurch. School was in Hawke's Bay. Diana Edwards commuted between home and boarding school each term by inter-island ferry and train.



It was the family spirit, Edwards' daughter Shan says. It was a spirit of get on in life, face your challenges, do your thing. Edwards demonstrated the spirit in the whirl of family and social life, in her profession as an obstetrician and gynaecologist and as a champion for women's rights.

She had to be, and was, determinedly strong to work in the controversial areas of contraception and abortion in Christchurch for 20 years from the 1980s.

Born Diana Montgomery, she excelled in sports at Woodford House School, Havelock North, enjoyed holidays at the Grigg family's Longbeach farm, Mid- Canterbury, and revelled in equestrian pursuits, including "riding to hounds" in North Canterbury.

Her parents instilled in her the belief that education was important for girls. When she told her father she wanted to study medicine, he applauded the decision.

She completed a year's study at Canterbury University, while taking night classes in Latin for entry to medical school. She received university blues for hockey and netball (then called basketball) and represented Canterbury at netball.

While at Otago Medical School she captained the university and provincial hockey teams and was a member of the university ski team. She qualified in 1948 and served as a house surgeon and registrar at Dunedin and Melbourne before travelling by ship to Britain. She worked in various hospitals in England while achieving specialist qualifications in obstetrics and gynaecology (O and G).

A "difficult" house surgeon under her supervision brought himself very much to her notice. He was Welshman Bill Edwards. They married and worked together in Nigeria in 1962.

A six-month break in New Zealand followed before the couple formed a specialist O and G team for the Isle of Wight hospitals. A decade later they moved to Canada. She worked as a research assistant, clinical associate and staff physician at St John's, Newfoundland, over a 10-year period. She and Bill returned to New Zealand in 1985.

Shan remembers her mother through these years as highly sociable. She made many friends and extended generous hospitality to them, making a name for herself as a gracious host and a great cook.

“What a fantastic mother she was, always positive, keen for us to give everything a go,” Shan says. Do what you want and be what you want, and if it fails, it is character building, was her advice.

The family settled on an orchard near Blenheim in 1985. Edwards took up the role of medical director of the Family Planning Association in Christchurch and, being accustomed to commuting, drove between the two towns weekly for several years. She still found the energy to work in the orchard at weekends. A few speeding tickets later, she re-located to Christchurch.

Her Family Planning role included delivering and monitoring clinical services and teaching doctors, nurses and medical students across Canterbury, West Coast and Marlborough. She continued her long involvement in research, teaching, and writing for medical journals.

Her work involved her in the acrimonious public debate over abortion. Shan says her primary focus was on advocating for all aspects of women’s rights. Her fight for the right to abortion grew out of this.

“She promoted women’s choice. She was always championing women and standing up for them,” Shan says. She was particularly concerned about the growth of Muslim fundamentalism and its impact on women.

Friend and colleague Dr Robyn Hewland says Edwards was “a pioneer for women's health”. The two served jointly on the NZ Medical Women's Association and attended conferences of the international body. Edwards represented the association on the National Council of Women.

Edwards became clinical director of Lyndhurst Hospital, on Bealey Ave. She was registered as a certifying consultant for women seeking abortions, a role required under the new law. In later years she was a co-director of Istar, a company with charitable trust status that imported the so-called “abortion pill”, the drug RU486. Revenue from the venture was paid into a fund to assist women in need.

Friend and colleague Helen Eskett says Edwards was a woman of “enormous talent, intellect, tenacity and love of life”.

“I never met anyone with so much energy, enthusiasm and commitment for the work she undertook,” Eskett says.

Edwards retired at 75, though she sustained her determination to work for women well into her 80s. After her husband died, she remained a keen bridge player and enthusiast for horses. She was dedicated to family, visiting her daughter in England often. She died at 90.

Diana Edwards, born Christchurch, April 21, 1923; died Christchurch, March 10, 2014. Pre-deceased by husband William; survived by daughters Anne and Shan, son John and six grandchildren.

Mike Crean wrote this obituary. It originally appeared under the heading *Medical Specialist Advocate for Women’s Rights* in *The Press* newspaper (Christchurch) on 15 April 2014 . We thank them for reprint permission.