

Biographies
(Eulogies)
June 25, 2020

In Celebration of Ruth Kajander (1924 -2019) by Sam Sussman

I have been invited to write a eulogy on Dr. Ruth Elisabeth Emelia Auguste Kajander (née Koeppé) 1924-2019.



Ruth Elisabeth Emelia Auguste Kajander (née Koeppé)

Eulogies, in contradistinction to obituaries, highly praise the individual for contributions in a field in which the individual was a participant. I do hope that I can do justice to Dr. Kajander's contribution to the field of psychiatry and specifically to her legacy in the field of psychopharmacology and community psychiatry.

After emigrating to Canada in 1952 Dr. Kajander worked at the Oshawa General Hospital, as well as the London Psychiatric Hospital. It was at the London Psychiatric Hospital that she carried out her pioneer work with chlorpromazine which revolutionized the treatment and care of the severely mentally ill. For the sake of brevity I will not go into the roadblocks Dr. Kajander encountered, both as a woman and as a German immigrant. Suffice it to say that since her time there, Canada has evolved into the multicultural accepting society it is today.

London Psychiatric Hospital was where I was the Director of Social Work from 1975-1997. While pursuing doctoral and post-doctoral work in the United Kingdom concerning the history of Canadian psychiatry, sociology, social work and social policy I became fascinated by an untold, significant psychiatric historical event. Dr. Ruth Kajander pioneered the use of chlorpromazine (Largactil) in the same institution where I had been the Director of Social Work since 1975. My desire to “make things right” in the sense of recognizing this epochal contribution led to my authoring the 1999 monograph *Dr. Ruth Kajander: A Pioneer in Canadian Psychiatry. In Conversation with Sam Sussman Ph.D.*

It has been stated that the introduction of chlorpromazine was one of the most important advances in medicine in the 20th century and Dr. Kajander was a pioneer in the administration of this drug in Canada. “Drs. Kajander and Lehmann (Montreal, Quebec) working separately, were the first in Canada to explore and employ a momentous new treatment,” said Dr. Harold Merskey, Professor Emeritus Psychiatry, Western University, London, Ontario (Sussman 1999).

In 1953, while working at Oshawa General Hospital in the Anesthesia Department, Dr. Kajander noted that when an anesthetist (Dr. Elizabeth Martin) utilized Largactil prior to total anesthesia the patient was calm and not asleep. Dr. Kajander, ever the observant empirical physician, thought about the drug’s benefits for psychiatric patients! In the fall that year, she convinced the medical superintendent at London Psychiatric to allow her to administer this medication to some patients; the results were most beneficial. Dr. Kajander then presented her findings in November 1953 at the Ontario Neuro-psychiatric Association in Whitby, Ontario.

Dr. Kajander never received any recognition for this most credible, revolutionary achievement. Worldwide laurels and recognition went instead to Dr. J. Hamon of Paris (1952) and Dr. Heinz Lehmann of Montreal (1954).

Dr. Kajander never made any claims to be the first to introduce Largactil to North America, while Dr. Lehmann is recognized historically as being this person. However, there is no doubt that Dr. Kajander was certainly the first for Ontario!

It must be noted that Dr. Kajander worked both individually and independently and that she had no communication with anyone in psychopharmacology before the utilization of Largactil at London Psychiatric Hospital.

For more than 50 years Dr. Kajander devoted her professional life to Community Psychiatry. In 1957 she became founding director of the former Port Arthur Mental Health Clinic and worked in both private practice and hospital settings in Thunder Bay, Ontario, and environs.

Dr. Kajander was the first female president of the Ontario Psychiatric Association in 1982, and one of the first women actively involved in the Ontario Medical Association.

She was named a member of the Order of Canada in 2011 for her care of patients with psychiatric illnesses in Northern Ontario.

Reference:

Sussman S. Dr. Ruth Kajander: A Pioneer in Canadian Psychiatry. In Conversation with Sam Sussman Ph.D. Sussco Publishing Limited, London, ON. 1999.

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