



Checkmate

by **Marika Azzopardi**

What do chess and rheumatology have in common? Not much at face value except that they are both part of the life of Dr Andrew Borg, Consultant Rheumatologist at Mater Dei and champion chess player. How did it all come about, fall in place? Certainly one square at a time.

On the professional front, Dr Borg travelled to the UK in 1988 to proceed with his studies. He found himself as a registrar in General medicine in Stoke-on-Trent where he met a Rheumatologist by the name of Dr Ted Hothersall. "He was a consultant there and he highly encouraged me to take up this speciality, following and directing me through my career ever since. He happened to be a frequent visitor to Malta and was a good friend of dermatologist Professor Joe Pace. I took up a registrar's post with him and he was constantly very supportive of me and my young family since we had a three-month-old daughter at the time."

Because of the situation in the mid-eighties where the Maltese medical degree only had partial recognition in the UK, he could not go into a surgical speciality easily. However he could go into a medical speciality and it seemed the ideal one to follow.

His interest in water polo which he had practised back in Malta for many years, winning three National Championships with Sliema ASC and another two with Exiles, as well as a two year stint with Newcastle Paragon in the UK contributed to his decision to take up rheumatology. "Since I knew sport injuries well (having sustained rib, finger and nose fractures, shoulder tears and hip injuries during my water polo career!), I was personally interested in the treatment and outcome of sport-related musculoskeletal problems."

After six years studying in the UK and 10 years practising as a Consultant Rheumatologist in South Wales, Bath and Basingstoke, Dr Borg returned to Malta in 2004.

Today the bulk of his patients tend to be older patients whose bodies experience varied musculoskeletal problems, back and neck pain,

osteoarthritic problems, osteoporosis and the like. However his specific area does not concentrate solely on treating elderly patients, as arthritic and rheumatoid conditions are also to be found in children who are unfortunately, all too often, under-diagnosed. In this regard, Dr Borg runs a monthly paediatric rheumatology clinic which adds to his loaded burden. In between talking of his family – his wife Mariella who is a consultant in public health medicine and his two children, Renee - nineteen (presently studying to be a vet), and Matthew - seven, we approach the topic of chess. Dr Borg explains how it all began way back in 1976, when he was, along with his brother, roped in with the Gzira Chess Club. "We were both introduced to the game by my father who decided it was the ideal activity to keep us both out of mischief!"

However, it turned into something beyond that. By 1978 he won the Malta



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on joints

Junior Championship; in 1980 he won a silver medal at the World Team Championships with future World Champion Garry Kasparov bagging the bronze! He represented Malta on a number of subsequent occasions until going up to the UK. After giving up chess completely for a number of years he restarted playing in 2000 in the World Team Championships in Turkey. But it was only in 2004 when he returned to Malta that he resumed active competitive chess, winning the Malta championship at the first time of asking, and was runner-up in the following two years. Unfortunately both in 2007 and 2008 he was unable to play due to work commitments. "Chess is like a virus. You either have it or you don't. There is a beauty in making things work and helping them to fall neatly into place. One eminent mathematician compared chess to solving algebra. He said that his initial aim was to solve the problem. However if the solution was not a beautiful one, then it must be incorrect. I feel this epitomises the game of chess excellently."

Ideally an expert chess player would spend seven hours a day at the game, each day of the week. As things stand,

he doesn't manage to play every day, except for the odd hour after all the family is asleep. But is he a patient man? "I wouldn't say chess has anything to do with patience. It is more about dedication and being focused. Quite frankly all chess players tend to be professionals, players who are used to discipline, to following clear-cut rules. Chess players must also be very fit because it takes quite a good level of fitness to endure long games of concerted mental effort. This is clearly an area I need to work on!"

The internet has opened new horizons in chess enabling one to find opponents from all corners of the world. However, none of these games are serious and are usually 3 minute or 5 minute games, hardly serious preparation for world ranking competitions.

In Malta he reckons there is a very limited pool of strong players, seven or eight at most. "This means we have to travel abroad to confront new, strong opponents. The Malta Chess Federation presently has some 200 members, many of whom are quite young. Additionally there is an active schools' programme which is striving to generate new and strong chess

players, so the future of Maltese chess looks promising."

And so, in between injecting painful joints, backs and necks, Dr Borg relies on chess to ease his own tense muscles. It is certainly one sport which can be practised for many years even after physical sport is contra-indicated ... and not necessarily because of painful joints, spines and backs.

As Dr. Borg said "chess players never die young ... they know all the right moves !"

