Malcolm Ross (Barney) Mowat

Dr Malcolm Ross Mowat (MB ChB, Dip Obst) died of a major stroke, a complication of cardiovascular disease, in the Greymouth Hospital on 5 June 2010.

Born into a farming family on 15 December 1933, Barney, as he was always known, went to school in Fairton, just north of Ashburton, and then he boarded at Timaru Boys’ High School, whose Old Boys, he argued, were just as good as those from Christ’s College, but they didn’t wear moleskins.

Barney’s father was a soldier in the Great War, who farmed successfully for many years in spite of losing an arm during action against the enemy. Barney’s teachers considered the University Entrance examinations would be too hard for him, so he went back to the farm, having passed School Certificate.

Rapidly tiring of driving a tractor, he went back to school at Ashburton High and it was there that he got his University Entrance accredited. At Canterbury University College in 1953, he successfully completed an intermediate year (with a very good mark in Botany) and that gave him the options of Agriculture, Veterinary work, Dentistry, or Medicine. Having decided (on the basis of some party-going) that doctors had the most fun, Barney went to Dunedin and entered the Medical School. He graduated in 1959.

Barney was a House Surgeon at Nelson Hospital in 1960 and 1961. He briefly worked as a Registrar in Radiology at Queen Margaret Hospital, but he went on to take a job as House Officer at the Christchurch Women’s Hospital (which was formerly known as St Helen’s) for 6 months in the course of 1962. He then joined the late Kevin O’Connor in general practice on Waimairi Road where he especially enjoyed the maternity work. About 1976 he joined the Student Health Service at the University of Canterbury.

In 1988, Barney was appointed as the Special Area Doctor at Whataroa, in South Westland. He remained in this remote coastal area as the solo practitioner, serving patients scattered from Hokitika in the north to the Haast River in the south, for over 10 years. Search and rescue work was a regular part of the practice. Together with his soul mate, Juliet, he shared an enormous love of the wilderness, painting, music and family during this time of geographical isolation.

When they moved to Hokitika, Barney continued to do occasional locums around the South Island until his health deteriorated. Late in 2009, he was hospitalised in Christchurch with Legionnaire’s disease.

Barney was an outdoors man, who spent time in Antarctica teaching snow craft. Roger Ridley-Smith writes, “It was entirely thanks to Barney that at various times I climbed Mount Rolleston, crossed the Crow Glacier, tramped the Routeburn Track and the Greenstone Valley (with one of my daughters, and Barney’s young son), and skied the length of the Tasman Glacier on one of the sublimest days of my life. I am by nature sedentary, and I was grateful to Barney for getting me going.”

He was involved in Mount Cheeseman ski field, where the growing family spent many weekends, either up on the mountain, or down by the skating rink. Barney was passionate about winter sports and encouraged his sons, Guy and Hamish, onto the ski racing circuit. Bag-piping was another great passion of Barney’s. In his earlier days he was a member of the Ashburton Pipe Band and more recently he played at many functions including Anzac commemorations. Having lost an 18-year-old brother in World War II, Anzac Day had personal significance. He was made a life member of the Hari Hari RSA. When at home, Barney celebrated life surrounded by pet animals and a flourishing vegetable garden.

An alcoholic whilst still at Medical School, Barney Mowat, when he was working as a House Surgeon, not infrequently began the day by swallowing a bottle of cough mixture, with its high alcohol content. The disease of alcoholism, and its associated craving for a variety of prescription drugs, both “uppers” and “downers”, eventually took over his life, and if he had not got help, he would have probably died.

During the 1970s, he was, as his daughter Shellie relates “in and out of mental hospitals”, and he had numerous ECT shock treatments because he was not ready to acknowledge his problem. A friend and colleague, Ian Fulton, recalls, “one of the most tragic memories I have of Barney was taking Hamish and Anna (my daughter) to visit him when he was hospitalised in Auckland and undergoing treatment for alcoholism whilst incarcerated in a six-bed ‘ward’ of fellow-travellers, his bed being an old-type army stretcher with a straw palliasse as a mattress.”

Shellie recalls that her father was eventually rescued by the veteran Alcoholics Anonymous worker, Trevor Grice, and with Grice’s help he finally addressed his drug and alcohol addictions. He went to Hanmer Hospital in 1975 as a very sick man, and there he began his recovery journey.

From then on he worked with enormous zeal for Alcoholics Anonymous until his death, and the help and support that he provided for others in distress is beyond calculation. This included helping Kiwis, and Americans, to face their addictions through his Antarctica connections. He was instrumental in setting up Dry Dock at the Christchurch Deep Freeze Base. He also paved the way for many in the medical profession to seek help. Knowing well the diabolical lure of alcohol for so many people, he adhered to complete sobriety for 35 years, attending several Alcoholics Anonymous meetings every week.
John Kent, another medical colleague, writes, “Barney was one of my oldest and dearest friends, certainly the most eccentric and with a wonderful sense of humour…I will cherish many fishing and hunting memories we shared over the years.”

On the West Coast, Barney acquired huge popularity (in 1999 he was awarded South Westland Person of the Year). About 400 people attended his funeral in Greymouth on 12 June 2010. The congregation represented his wide circle of friends, medical colleagues, patients, members of Alcoholics Anonymous, and many of the mates with whom he went hunting, shooting and fishing. After the service he was buried in the Hokitika Lawn Cemetery.

At the funeral, tributes were delivered by Hugh Bodle, Peter Adams, Gerry Hack, Paddy Kennedy and on behalf of Trevor Grice. Anyone who wishes to read these accounts of a remarkable life should send their name and email address to r.sdekkka@actrix.gen.nz

Barney is survived by his wife Juliet; his first wife Joey and three of their children (Shellie, Nicola and Hamish); and four of his five grandchildren.

Barney’s long-time friend Roger Ridley-Smith compiled this obituary, with assistance from his family.