OBITUARY

Ronald James (Jim) Methven

Ronald James Methven, the first full-time Consultant Child Psychiatrist to the Auckland Hospital died aged 86 on 23 August 2014. He was the founding father of child mental health services in Auckland.

Jim, as everyone called him, and the name he preferred, was born in Nelson the older of the two children of Ronald Henley Methven MA (1897–1944) and Ethel Mary Methven née Peck MA (1901–1985).

His father, Senior French master at Nelson College and connected to the well-known South Island Methven family, had been born in New Zealand. Jim’s mother was born in England and came to New Zealand in her teens with her own father, Frank Peck FRIBA, the English architect who designed Nelson Cathedral.

Jim attended Nelson College and distinguished himself at swimming being Junior (1943), Intermediate (1944) and Senior (1945) School Champion and winning School “blues” for swimming in 1944 and 1945.

He represented Nelson at the New Zealand Amateur Swimming Championships in 1944. Swimming was a lifelong interest and he coached his grandson, Nathan Smith, to victory in the national junior 100 metres backstroke in 1996.

Early in 1945 Jim, now in the sixth form, left school because his father had died in 1944 and he felt the need to support his mother and sister financially. He became apprenticed to Hinchcliffe’s, a Nelson chemist. He took the Diploma in Pharmacy in 1949 and worked in Palmerston North and Nelson Public Hospitals. Not entirely happy at the prospect of a career in pharmacy Jim switched to medicine, graduating MB ChB (NZ) from Otago University in 1957.

While a junior doctor at Nelson Hospital (1958–59) Jim decided to specialise in psychiatry. In 1960 he entered the training programme of the Victoria State Mental Health Authority with medical officer posts at Ararat Hospital (1960) and Larundel Hospital (1961–3). He took the University of Melbourne Diploma in Psychological Medicine in 1963.

Deciding to become a child psychiatrist he took further postgraduate training at the Royal Melbourne Children's Hospital (1963–65). His last post in Australia was Consultant Psychiatrist at the Observatory Child Psychiatry Clinic in Melbourne.

Jim returned to Auckland in 1966 to be Director of the New Zealand Department of Health’s Child Health Clinic at Marinoto and to provide outpatient and liaison services to Princess Mary Hospital. In 1970 the Child and Family Unit (CFU) opened to provide the inpatient service. This was based in Ward 12, an aged standalone building in the grounds of Auckland Hospital near the Princess Mary Hospital. The upper admission age of 14 years was soon raised to 15 then to 17. Adolescents with schizophrenia, bipolar illness and anorexia nervosa could then be treated. The CFU provided a national inpatient service for some 10 years until child psychiatry services developed in the other
main centres. In 1993 the CFU moved into the new Starship Children’s Hospital. Jim retired from full-time work in 1993 but continued part-time consulting work for five more years.

In 1970 Jim was joined by John Werry as a part-time consultant. John had been appointed Professor of Psychiatry in the University of Auckland in 1970. He brought the academic and research outlook into child psychiatry. The CFU taught child psychiatry to medical students and to trainees in paediatrics and in child psychiatry. Jim and John maintained a close, harmonious working relationship based on mutual respect and clear domains of responsibility.

Jim did no personal research, preferring to develop the service and to participate in the educational efforts of the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists. This resulted in a training programme in Auckland leading to a postgraduate qualification in child psychiatry. For this work Jim received an RANZCPsych citation in 1973.

Jim believed nuclear war to be the pre-eminently threat to the survival of humankind and he opposed the proliferation of nuclear weapons. To further his opposition he joined the New Zealand Affiliate of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW) and was Chairman from 1993 to 1999. With Erich Geiringer he represented New Zealand at IPPNW conferences in Moscow (1987), Hiroshima (1989) and Mexico City (1993).

The writings of the great philosophers exercised Jim in his later years extending a life-long interest in philosophy. He shared his reflections with his friends by leading monthly seminars of the West Auckland U3A called Great Ideas.

Jim was twice married. In 1957 he married Jeanette (Jan) McKenzie; they had three children. They divorced in 1994. In 1995 Jim married Kate Hyde-Smith. Jim is survived by Kate; by Jeanette and the three children of their marriage; by three step-children from Kate's former marriage; nine grandchildren, two great grandchildren and his sister Dorothy Carmody.

Jim’s legacy is the child mental health service in Auckland which today employs over 500 staff. Jim was a pioneer in Auckland and his influence extended to the rest of New Zealand and to Australia.


Still are thy pleasant voices, thy nightingales, awake;
For Death, he taketh all away, but them he cannot take.

John Werry and Brian Barraclough wrote this obituary.