Derek Alexander Larnder

OBE for Services to Dermatology

Dermatologist Dr Derek Larnder was liked and trusted throughout Canterbury. His dedication to caring, his consideration of the underlying causes of skin problems and his production of reliable medications endeared him to thousands of patients.

Larnder died on 3 December 2009 in Christchurch, aged 87. One of the old school of doctors, he epitomised his generation’s altruism and dedication to helping people in need.

His daughter, Sarah, says her father did not like to see people suffering and worked hard to find ways to help them. His level of commitment to patients limited his available time. However, he was a loving father who made time for the family and ensured all felt important.

His wife, Prue, says he packed an enormous amount of work into his life. Although never boastful, he took satisfaction from his professional and voluntary service and quiet pride in his achievements.

The awards and honours he received meant much to him but, to anyone meeting him, he was a down-to-earth and gentle man.

Larnder was born in Timaru and began school at Waimataitai Primary School, before the family moved south to Waimate. He excelled academically and in sport at Waimate High School, completing his secondary education at Timaru Boys’ High School.

Studying medicine at the University of Otago in the 1940s prevented him from serving overseas in World War II, but he took part in army medical training camps. He demonstrated prodigious powers of memory as a student and, soon after, as a lecturer in anatomy. He frequently astounded his classes by calling the roll of 120 forwards and backwards, without notes.

Larnder graduated as a doctor in 1947 and worked at Rotorua and Wanganui hospitals, as well as lecturing at the University of Otago. He enjoyed travel and made tours as a ship’s surgeon, including one on a troopship taking British forces to the Korean War.

His heart was in surgery and he went to England for specialist study, achieving his qualifications in 1955. However, a medical allergy made surgical work impractical.
and he switched to his second choice, dermatology. Back in England for further study, he met and married English nurse Prue Daniel.

He returned to New Zealand in 1959, settling in Christchurch. He worked as a consultant to Christchurch Hospital and in private practice in Colombo St. Prue says he enjoyed his work and the people he met. “He was a great admirer of the old-fashioned general practitioner and liked to be available for his patients,” she says. His manner with patients inspired trust.

He understood that skin conditions were often related to stress. His rapport with people helped treat “the inner man” by giving hope and the confidence to cope with life, thus reducing stress levels. Larnder laconically explained the link between stress and skin complaints with the line, “If you’re bitchy, you’re itchy”.

He was invited in 1981 to join the Order of St Lazarus, an ancient, universal Christian organisation dedicated to the care and assistance of the poor and the sick. The order was formed to combat leprosy and membership became an important part of Larnder’s life. He hosted a pan-Pacific symposium on leprosy and did much voluntary work for the order. With its help, he launched Christchurch’s first free clinics for skin cancer checks, in 1986. The popularity and success of the clinics led to their extension throughout the South Island and to the Chatham Islands.

Larnder suffered a brain haemorrhage in 1986, but recovered and returned to work. Three years later, the Order of St Lazarus awarded him its prestigious Order of Merit and the Queen awarded him the OBE for services to dermatology. He retired in 1993.

His participation in professional associations included roles of president of the New Zealand Dermatological Society, and co-founder and president of the Psoriasis Association. He was the only doctor in Australasia to become an honorary overseas member of the British Association for Dermatologists and was a fellow of the American Academy of Dermatology. He was Senior Commonwealth Fellow in Dermatology in 1972.

In his retirement, Larnder at last found time for sport and travel. He and Prue travelled extensively.

Derek Alexander Larnder, born Timaru, 22 June 1922; died Christchurch, 3 December 2009. Survived by wife Prue, daughters Sarah, Bridget, Katie and Diana and nine grandchildren.

Mike Crean wrote this obituary; it first appeared in The Press newspaper (Christchurch).