Philip Rushmer

West Auckland GP leaves fitting legacy for patients

Philip Rushmer, a giant among west Auckland GPs, whose determination to improve the region's health services inspired four practices to combine into a single integrated health centre, died in February 2014 after a seven-year battle with cancer. He was 71.

Visionary thinking, sincere leadership and an unending dedication to his patients typify Dr Rushmer's medical career.

These qualities were poignantly illustrated as he chaired his final HealthWEST meeting from his living room, just over a week before his death.

Sitting in a La-Z-Boy chair in his Titirangi home, the thoughtful, articulate doctor, who treated generations of the same families, resigned from the leadership post of the social services organisation he had held since 2007. "I have been to many board meetings over the years with many organisations, but every part of that meeting I will remember vividly," HealthWEST chief executive Aroha Hudson says.

At the meeting's conclusion, Ms Hudson presented Dr Rushmer with a pounamu manaia. "It acts as a provider and a protector, and is likened to a bird sitting on your shoulder looking after one's spirit, and when your time comes it will guide your spirit where it is supposed to go," she says.

Dr Rushmer was born 24 May 1942 and grew up on a farm in the rural English village of Toft Monks, Norfolk. His father William died when Dr Rushmer was seven, leaving his mother Sybil to raise four children.

"[Sybil's] love of music was inherited by the family and Philip enjoyed a passion for classical music and opera that lasted a lifetime," says Penny Rushmer, Dr Rushmer's widow.

After completing schooling at Paston School, Dr Rushmer was accepted to study medicine at Guy's Hospital in central London. In 1966, while still training, he met Penny, whom he married in 1968.

Dr Rushmer's general practice career began in the rural community of Candover Valley, in Hampshire. By 1976, he had become disillusioned with the UK's National Health Service and, on the recommendations of locums who had come through his practice, his family packed their bags and moved to Titirangi, west Auckland, where he joined Golf Road Medical Centre.
In 1982, GP Vicky Macdonald and her new husband had just moved to Golf Rd, and Dr Macdonald needed to find a general practice placement as part of her Primex exam. Her husband suggested dropping in to the medical centre down the road. She entered the practice looking for a six-week locum, met Dr Rushmer, and walked out a co-owner. Dr Macdonald worked alongside Dr Rushmer for the following three decades, and says he was consistent and unwavering in his fairness and optimism.

"In all that time we never had any arguments or disagreements. We were able to sit down and work through issues and, most of the time, Philip was able to convince me his way was correct," she laughs. Indeed, Dr Rushmer's exceptional negotiating skills saw him take up several general practice leadership posts throughout his career.

One of his early roles was as chair of the NZMA Maternity Services Negotiating Committee. Dr Rushmer was a staunch advocate for the role of GPs in obstetrics and he fought for the rights of women to be given the choice of who delivered their babies, remembers west Auckland GP Jonathan Simon.

Dr Rushmer was inaugural chair of the NZMA GP Council in 1998, following the demise of the General Practitioners' Association, and held the role until 2001. He then served on the NZMA board for several years, before turning his political attention to his own west Auckland neighbourhood. He joined the board of HealthWEST in 2006 and become chair the following year.

For his contribution to general practice, Dr Rushmer was made a distinguished fellow of the RNZCGP in 2011. "Philip is known as a treasured source of wisdom and compassion, and is selfless and dedicated to the medical profession," the college said at the time.

At the age most people consider retiring, Dr Rushmer was finding his second wind. He could see problems in the way health services were being delivered to west Aucklanders and, with fellow GP Peter Woolford, he began canvassing opinion among GPs in the area about joining forces.

In September 2007, with Drs Woolford and Macdonald, plus GPs Craig King and Maelen Tagelagi, he began planning a medical centre that would offer something the individual practices could not. The result is Totara Health Services, an enormous integrated family health centre offering general practice, specialist and social services in the heart of New Lynn.

At the practice opening last June, in front of a 100-strong crowd which included prime minister John Key, Dr Rushmer reiterated the vision for patient-centred care he shared with his colleagues, and called out Waitemata DHB for dropping the ball in meeting the community's needs. "To the DHB, I say let's work together to improve your engagement with primary practice, and focus on putting the patient first," he said.

Dr Rushmer was unafraid to step on a few toes, but it was always in the interests of his patients, Dr Woolford says. He wanted to leave a legacy that would ensure his patients' healthcare was the best it could possibly be.

Dr Rushmer was battling cancer throughout the clinic's development. In 2007, he was diagnosed with prostate cancer and, after beating it, he received a bladder cancer diagnosis two years later.
Yet, he persevered in his work. Dr Woolford says Dr Rushmer was always putting his hand up to fill in at Totara Health Services, and ran clinics until his illness forced him to retire. He was showing a Health Workforce New Zealand representative around the practice just 10 days before he died.

More than 300 people attended Dr Rushmer's funeral service at Davis Funerals in Henderson earlier this month. He was described by colleagues and patients as dignified, gracious, a true gentleman.

He was buried wearing the pounamu manaia gifted to him by HealthWEST.

On the service programme, Dr Rushmer is pictured grinning and holding a cigar. The caption reads "Do what you love". It's a mantra which, by all accounts, Dr Rushmer lived his life by.

This obituary originally appeared in *New Zealand Doctor* newspaper ([www.nzdoctor.co.nz](http://www.nzdoctor.co.nz)) and was written by Jeremy Olds.