Henry Jeffray Weston


Jeff Weston’s life was one of dedication to the well-being of the children under his care and throughout New Zealand and to the many Paediatricians who have been challenged and inspired by his teaching and example.

Jeff was born in New Plymouth where his father was the local newspaper proprietor and where he attended New Plymouth Boys’ High School. He went on to Otago Medical School and then to Wellington Hospital for his House Officer and Registrar years.

His ambition was to follow a career in respiratory medicine and travelled to London where he worked in the Hammersmith and Brompton Hospitals.

After a year, he changed to paediatrics and obtained a position at the Hospital for Sick Children, Great Ormond St, London, where he rose to the position of Resident Assistant Physician. After this training he returned to New Zealand where he held the post of part-time Paediatrician at Hutt Hospital for 2 years before moving to a similar position at Wellington Hospital. At the same time he was honorary Paediatrician at the Home of Compassion and the local Karitane Hospital.

In 1975, with the enlargement of the Wellington Clinical School, he took on the position of inaugural Professor of Paediatrics as well as the Head of the Hospital Department. He held these roles until his retirement in 1992. The teaching role made good use of his excellent clinical knowledge and suited his skills of organisation, people management and instilling enthusiasm in the students who came under his tutelage.

Many of these have gone on to careers in paediatrics and have benefited from his support and encouragement. On his retirement in 1992, he was appointed Emeritus Professor of Paediatrics and his contribution was further recognised in 2000 when he received with the inaugural Dean’s Medal for distinguished service to the School of Medicine.

His clinical interests were wide-ranging and appropriate to his role of General Paediatrician, but his experiences in London did engender a special interest in cardiology which he indulged by running clinics for congenital heart disease with his adult cardiology colleagues.

More widely than that however, he was a staunch advocate for all things to do with children’s health and their well-being, and paid particular attention to social problems and child abuse. In 1954 as a Paediatric Registrar, he was the first to identify a case of physical abuse of a young child in the Wellington region. Along with non-accidental
injury, he contributed to an understanding of accidental injury in children and its prevention.

As Head of Department he was advisor to the Hospital Board in Paediatrics and was similarly advisor to the Department of Health. He fought vigorously for resources and accommodation for the hospital service and was very proud when the new Children’s Hospital at Wellington was opened in 1988. This was the culmination of a lot of hard work both behind the scenes and in the media where his newspaper inheritance came into full play.

His wide view of paediatrics and children’s health saw him as President of the Paediatric Society and involved in a number of RACP committees, especially those to do with training and examinations, in addition to all his University commitments. He was a strong supporter of medicine in the Pacific especially, with visits to Singapore, China, Samoa and Manila under various auspices but all with the aim of developing paediatric teaching and services in these countries.

Following his ‘retirement’ he continued on as his own locum for a while and later enjoyed maintaining his clinical expertise with locums at a number of smaller hospitals in the area where his skills were much appreciated. One other important retirement job he was asked to do was to head the hospital O & G department. His impeccable honesty and open approach was an important factor in smoothing some of the problems they were facing at the time as everyone involved knew if he promised something, it would happen.

In his spare time he enjoyed life in the Territorial Army’s 2nd General Hospital Territorial and later the Defence HQ. He rose to the rank of Colonel and was awarded the Efficiency Decoration in 1972. He was also honorary aide-de-camp to the Governor General, Sir Bernard Fergusson. In his retirement he also explored one of his passions, geology, and gained great personal satisfaction when he graduated BSc from Victoria University in 1995.

A keen golfer, he was awarded a University Blue in 1949 and continued enjoying the game until very recently when his health became an issue. Skiing and family activities also were close to his heart. He died at home with his family after a long battle with prostate cancer.

Jeff was always an advocate for the welfare of children and the recognition that their requirements were very different from those of adult patients. He fought constantly for adequate facilities and services for them and earned the comment from the local newspaper (Evening Post) that he had “a brusque disregard for parliamentary sensitivities”. His arguments were always well-informed, often impassioned and he was capable of ignoring traditionalists disapproving of such innovations as more generous visiting for parents and even their staying overnight. He expected and rewarded good care by his staff, and his fairness and honesty was one of the reasons he was asked to act as head of the Obstetric Unit.

Above all, he had a good sense of humour and was very much a family man who was in regular contact with his children and grandchildren. Truly, this was a “man in whom there was no guile”.

Dr Archie Kerr (a retired paediatrician) wrote this obituary.