Graham Collingwood (Mont) Liggins

Professor Sir Graham Collingwood Liggins or ‘Mont’—as he was known to family, friends and colleagues alike—died peacefully on 24 August 2010, after a long illness.

Mont began his life in Thames (NZ) on 24 June 1926 (slightly behind his twin sister Elizabeth), the last of five children born to James, the local GP surgeon, and Isobel.

His nickname Mont derived from his insistence at the age of 3 on being named after cartoon character Monty Mouse—it stuck for life, perhaps an early indication of the determination with which Mont continued to approach life. Mont described his childhood in Thames as magical. He spent his weekends exploring, with his mates, the old mines, on one occasion finding abandoned dynamite with which they proceeded to blast the hillsides.

He also discovered ‘inventing’—with the help of a friend’s uncle they would build steam, diesel and electric engines, and huge fireworks!

At the age of 15, Mont moved from Thames to board at Auckland Grammar for a final year at school before successfully completing medical intermediate at Auckland University, and so to Otago Medical School. Mont described his intermediate year as the hardest he ever worked—and declared that high marks would mean that he had worked too hard with not enough fun.

At Otago, he got the balance right, spending the years developing a life’s passion for the outdoors, playing rugby and learning to ski and rock-climb. One of Mont’s proudest achievements was winning a downhill, slalom and jumping championship on Mt Ruapehu.

Later these sports were replaced by fishing (all kinds), golf and planting trees. He loved spending time with his sons and grandsons on their annual deep-sea fishing trips. Closer to shore were regular weekends spent fishing around Auckland Harbour and Opahi Bay, and fly-fishing at Lake Rotoiti.

With house surgeon years in Auckland behind him, Mont spent 2 years working as a GP in Hamilton, before heading to England in 1953 to train in Obstetrics and Gynaecology. He returned 6 years later with his beloved wife Celia and three of their four children (Anne, Graham, and Jackie—Chris was born 2 years later).

Celia was from Whitehaven, a small fishing town in Cumbria, UK—family legend has it that they applied for the same O&G registrar position in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. One position became two and the rest was history. Mont always said that none of his achievements would have been possible without the love, care and support of Celia (a busy Obstetrician and Gynaecologist herself).
In 1959 Mont was offered a job at National Women’s Hospital in the academic department, so began a 30-year career at NWH in clinical work, research and teaching. His life’s work was to try and understand the initiation of labour, using the sheep as a model. He developed pioneering intrauterine surgical techniques and showed that the foetus initiated labour in the sheep. It was his lasting frustrating that it wasn’t quite so clear in humans.

In the process of this experimental work he serendipitously made the discovery that cortisol accelerated lung maturation in the premature foetus. This observation led to the ground-breaking RCT where he and Ross Howe showed that giving steroid hormones to mothers in premature labour dramatically reduced the incidence of respiratory distress in the newborn.

Mont was fascinated by science and unanswered questions. He made seven trips to Antarctica, camping on the ice with a team from Harvard University, chasing Weddell seals and investigating their diving physiology. He was involved in fertility research and first described foetal breathing. He and Celia made lasting friendships in the scientific community, opening their homes to many overseas visitors.

Mont received many honours. He was KBE, CBE, FRS (London), FRSNZ, FRCOG, FRCS, FRACS, PhD(Auck), MBChB(Otago), receiving awards and honorary degrees from around the world.

He will be remembered as a great New Zealand scientist, but also as a great father, grandfather, friend, fisherman, forester, teacher, doctor. He is survived by three of his children (Anne, Jackie and Chris) and nine grandchildren.

Written by Dr Jackie Liggins—daughter and Liaison Psychiatrist at Middlemore Hospital, Auckland.