Obituary

John Prior OAM, MBBS

John Prior was one of the old school, a solo country general practitioner who spent almost his entire working life serving one community. He arrived in Boggabri, north-western New South Wales, in 1952 and was the town’s only medical practitioner for 50 years, until he retired at 80 years of age.

Born on 2 January 1922 in Sydney, John’s interest in medicine started as a child, when he swallowed a hacksaw blade that had to be surgically removed and later spent a year bedridden with polio.

He attended Waverley College and studied medicine at the University of Sydney, where he joined the Sydney University Regiment and graduated in 1946. He was a resident at St Vincent’s Hospital, Sydney, and a registrar at Lewisham Hospital before sailing to Kure, Japan, on the troop ship Kanimbla as part of the British Commonwealth Occupation Force. Starting as a pathologist at the Australian General Hospital, he eventually became director of surgery, after progressing to the rank of lieutenant colonel. In Kure, he met Betty Milburn, an Australian army nurse, who he married in 1949 in Yokohama.

After leaving Japan in 1951, John and Betty spent a year working in England before settling down in Boggabri. He described his early years in country practice as ‘‘the golden years of general practice’’, before many of the roles of the GP were co-opted by various medical specialties. He did everything, including surgery, pathology, obstetrics and postmortems.

In the traditional way, the surgery was attached to the family residence, which enabled him to see his growing family during a hectic work schedule that included surgery consultations, hospital rounds and home visits. He continued doing home visits and night calls until his retirement. He was tirelessly supported by Betty, who in her own right was much loved by the community.

He was honoured with the Medal of the Order of Australia in 1998 and the Centenary Medal in 2001. In 2003, the new Boggabri John Prior Multipurpose Service was named in recognition of his contribution to the community.

John passed away on 29 January 2014, survived by his children Elizabeth, Michael, Anne, Felicity Jane, John and Fiona, and nine grandchildren. Michael, Anne and John followed him into medicine.

Michael C StJ Prior
Elizabeth Prior Jonson
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Les Hemingway MBBS

Les Hemingway was born in Echuca, Victoria, on 22 June 1930, an identical twin and one of five children.

At the age of 14, he left school to start an apprenticeship as a fitter and turner. He completed his secondary education at night school and studied medicine at the University of Melbourne, graduating in 1955. As a medical student, he assisted at Footscray and District Hospital in his spare time, gaining valuable experience inserting intravenous drips and catheters. He supported himself through university by using the skills learnt from fitting and turning during his breaks.

Les taught himself to type at university, while secretary of the Medical Students’ Society. Throughout his career, he was known for his detailed self-typed histories to specialists, as well as brief but comprehensive notes on request forms for x-rays and pathology tests.

After graduating, Les converted to Catholicism. While working as a resident medical officer at Footscray and District Hospital, he met Verna Wohlfahrt, a nurse, and they married in 1958.

In 1958, Les entered practice in Warrnambool, where he remained for 37 years. In 1999, Geelong became his base, from which he provided locum relief for doctors in many remote locations around Australia, including Halls Creek in the Kimberley region of Western Australia (where he celebrated his 80th birthday). He was a self-confessed workaholic and only fully retired in 2013 at the age of 82. Medicine was both his life’s work and his passion.

He was a keen swimmer, although a close encounter with a shark in 1961 diminished his enthusiasm for ocean swimming.

Les had a genetic alteration of the SCN5A gene, resulting in sick sinus syndrome. In 1989, he received a pacemaker and, in 2006, he was diagnosed with cardiomyopathy.

Les passed away on 11 May 2014. He is survived by Verna, 10 children and 21 grandchildren.

Verna Hemingway
Patricia A Hemingway
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