

## **AGENDA ITEM 1.8 OBITUARY**

**MR KEITH McDOWELL EWEN FRACS  
GENERAL SURGEON  
7 SEPTEMBER 1924 - 18 JANUARY 2021**

Keith Ewen was born in Lower Hutt, the son of David Ewen and Marian Nathan. His father was managing-director of Sargood Son & Ewen, a prominent family business, Mayor of Lower Hutt and subsequently knighted for his many community and business contributions. There were two older siblings - brother, Ian, and sister, Barbara. Keith commenced at Huntley School, boarding there from the age of 10 to 14 years and becoming Head Prefect. There he played cricket and he was encouraged by his father to learn to box. He next attended Whanganui Collegiate where he became Second Head of School.

Completing his schooling, Keith went Otago University and gained entry to Otago Medical School in 1943. In Dunedin he resided at Selwyn College, where he served a term as President. With the country and many senior staff at war, medical students were called upon at an early stage to assist with patient care thus assisting the early acquisition of skills and responsibility. University years were also memorable for participation in boxing – he represented Otago University - and skiing at Coronet Peak each winter.

Keith completed his final year in Wellington and remained there as a house surgeon and subsequently surgical registrar during the next three years. In 1952 while skiing at Queenstown he met Barbara Gordon (with a North Canterbury farming background), an equally keen skier, and they struck up a friendship. The following year Keith travelled to England as a cargo ship doctor, planning to sit his Primary Fellowship examination three months later. Unfortunately, with travel delays he was four weeks late for the planned course and had to wait for the next. He was joined by Barbara soon after this and they married in 1953. With the Primary successfully completed he obtained a registrar post at Guildford St Luke's Hospital and completed his FRCS a year later. This was followed by a series of locum posts in London and the South of England.

Keith and Barbara, with 15 month old son, Rodney, returned to New Zealand by boat in 1956 to take up a three month locum appointment at Wellington – Keith working their passage as the ship's doctor and completing an appendectomy with a retired district nurse as anaesthetist en route. At the beginning of 1957 they moved to Auckland as he commenced as the first surgical registrar at Middlemore Hospital.

In 1958 Keith was appointed to a full-time position as a general surgeon at Green Lane Hospital. This later became a part-time appointment and Keith commenced in private practice. His surgical work encompassed all parts of the abdomen, with particular reference to the gastrointestinal system, and gallbladder. He was very involved with the introduction of GI tract stapling, and other new advances such as colonoscopy and chemotherapy in the management of malignancies. His surgical technique was very precise, carefully executed, and well taught to surgical registrars. Ward rounds were very formal with clear teaching to junior staff and medical students. Registrars on Acute call were expected to contact him about each case and instructions would be given about management. He and Barbara would invite the house surgeon and registrar rostered to his Green Lane ward along with other medical staff to their home for dinner – this always becoming a party appreciated by all.

Keith had a huge work capacity, often working 70-90 hours a week. He had a determined personality, at times holding his opinion firmly despite disagreements with others. The nursing staff admired him because he was invariably polite and respectful. In his private practice he operated at Lavington, Mercy and Brightside Hospitals. He continued working part time in public and private until aged 65 years, when he ceased his public hospital commitment and worked full-time in private practice for the next five years.

During 1961, aware the public health system was increasingly struggling to meet the demand, particularly for surgery, Keith was one of a group of surgeons who founded an independent private health care company. Serving terms on the Board and as Chair 1990 – 1994, he had to contend with the Upton/Gibbs health care reforms, where private health care was very much in the gun sights of the reformers. His leadership contributed significantly towards The Southern Cross Medical Care Society becoming New Zealand's largest private health insurance company. He served terms as Secretary and Chairman of the New Zealand Committee of the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons. Keith also played a significant role in the development of the Auckland Cancer Society. Barbara set up the associated mobility service which is now a highly professional service providing transport for patients for their radiotherapy treatment and for family to visit family members. Keith served terms as Board Member and Chair of Wings – an organisation committed to rehabilitation of drug addicts.

With a daily physical exercise regime, Keith was very fit. Working at Greenlane Hospital he never once took a lift, always walking the stairs until he damaged a knee. In his later years he became a regular swimmer and a keen walker using an exercycle daily. He played golf regularly, being a member of the Auckland Golf Club for 50 years. He was a very good skier and this remained a passion throughout his life, leading to many trips to the Central Otago ski fields. Keith had a love of the outdoors and the family property at Orere Point became a place for swimming, fishing, boating and skiing. He was a long-term member of the Northern Club in Auckland, and a sidesman and reader at St Marks Church for 25-30 years. In retirement he joined the Shakespeare Club and Provis.

Keith Ewen led a full life participating with gusto, planning, and energy. He enjoyed his retirement and with Barbara formed a complete partnership. He leaves behind his much loved wife, Barbara, children, Rod, Sue and Nicky (and Don deceased) nine grandchildren and four great-grandchildren.

*This obituary is based upon the eulogy provided by Rod Ewen and with the assistance of David Morris FRACS and Pat Alley FRACS.*