

AGENDA ITEM 1.8 OBITUARY

MR JOHN HUNTER WILLIAMS FRCS Eng FRCS Ed FRACS PLASTIC & RECONSTRUCTIVE SURGEON 26 JUNE 1925 – 10 NOVEMBER 2020

John Williams was a superb surgeon who developed a world-wide reputation not only in one area of expertise, but two – both cleft lip and palate and hypospadias. He had very high standards and was extremely humble as a surgeon – “perfection was only just good enough”. He was always very considered in his advice to others, and like his predecessor and mentor, Sir William Manchester, he was a patient and excellent teacher.

John Hunter Williams was born in Dannevirke, his father Charles Skinner Williams was an Orthopaedic and General Surgeon and his mother, Edna Debenham, a pathology technician. He was given the name John Hunter in memory of the 18th century Scottish anatomist-surgeon – thus John’s fate was sealed! John was the eldest of four children with a brother, Peter, and two sisters, Barbara and Susan. As a teenager John contracted polio and was left with left sided weakness; he was able to recover sufficiently to study at Whanganui Collegiate. During this time he demonstrated considerable ability at sketching.

John entered Otago University with an interest in radio and electronics completing a BSc. Lacking confidence in mathematics, he applied for and gained entry to Medical School. During this time John resided at Selwyn College, but also spent considerable time with his mother’s family who were based in Dunedin. John spent his final year as a medical student in Auckland, where for experience, he frequently worked after hours in the Casualty Department. It was there that he met a Canadian nurse, Joan Hammond, who was on a working holiday travelling the world, but who stayed and married John. Graduating MB ChB in 1951 he was determined to follow a surgical career.

John remained in Auckland for his house surgeon experience and in his first job was assigned to Plastic Surgery at Middlemore Hospital under Mr W.M. Manchester - having been warned to pay great attention to Manchester’s teaching, so he could repeat the litanies word-for-word on ward rounds! Having survived this experience, he returned as a plastic surgery registrar in 1954 with the legendary Manchester insisting that he should not be anything other than a Plastic Surgeon! After two years as a surgical registrar, John travelled to England as a ship’s medical officer to obtain a fellowship in surgery. Meanwhile, Joan and their two boys travelled to Canada, to be with her family. Living at the College of Surgeons hostel, John first worked as a prosector at The Royal College of Surgeons, and then obtained small jobs at The Royal Marsden Hospital and Smallfields obtaining both Edinburgh and English fellowships. Shortly after being re-united with Joan and the children he was summoned home.

From June 1958 John was employed full-time at Middlemore Hospital as a plastic surgeon. He obtained his FRACS in 1963 and entered private practice in 1965. As Manchester became more involved with overseas trips as a visiting professor, John dealt with an increasing volume of cleft lip and palate surgery in Manchester’s absence. In the same way his involvement in the surgery of hypospadias steadily developed, initially employing one stage repairs for distal hypospadias and two stage for the more severe proximal condition. He subsequently adopted the Horton-Devine techniques including the one stage free preputial lining graft technique and taught it to younger surgeons in New Zealand and Australia.

When Manchester retired from his post at Middlemore Hospital in 1979, John became Head of Department. He continued to work, particularly on cleft lip and palate and hypospadias, up until his hospital board enforced retirement at age 65 in 1990. Following retirement from his part time visiting surgeon position he was re-employed and continued to provide outpatient clinics and surgery at Middlemore and Waitakere Hospitals. John became involved in College affairs, initially as a Plastic Surgery Division Board member and later Chairman. He also served as a College examiner for a number of years. In 1999 he gave the Manchester Lecture at the RACS ASC. John worked in Qui Nhon Hospital in Viet Nam as a member of the civilian surgical team at the time of the Tet Offensive, and later visited Western Samoa as a member of the Interplast service.

Aside from surgery John had wide interests. He was intensely interested in computers, becoming an acknowledged expert in the Linux operating system and he became proficient in social media. His garden in Pakuranga was a source of great pride. While roses took pride of place about the family home a rough gully next door was transformed into a native and exotic wilderness. A keen reader, particularly of philosophy and religion, John was also a very good photographer. The Williams family spent many holidays at the matchbox-sized one room bach John's father had built at Tauranga Bay adjacent to Whangaroa Harbour in the Far North. Fishing and sailing a sunburst sailing yacht built by John in the 1960s – it is still being sailed in Tauranga Bay by the family today – were particular pleasures.

John Williams passed away on November 20, 2020 after a short illness at the place that he had spent over 45 years of his life – Middlemore Hospital. John was predeceased by his beloved wife, Joan, by four years. He is survived by his children Charles and Phyllis, Matthew and Janice, Andrew and Anne, James, Joanna and David; four grand-children and three great grand-children.

“The kauri has fallen, the karakia chanted,
The long haul charted, the giant lies still” Nancy Bruce, 1960.

This obituary was provided by Cary Mellow FRACS