

# Rose from humble beginnings

## LABEEB ISAAC MCGUIRE

Doctor, surgeon, lecturer, registrar

**Born:** June 15, 1924, Bishmizzeen, Lebanon

**Died:** June 6, 2015, Brisbane

DOCTOR Labeeb McGuire was known as a great man in the true sense of the word. He was not one to make a lot of noise or fuss and never sought the limelight. He avoided talking much about himself or his achievements, of which there were many professionally and personally.

It was those very things that were the hallmarks of his greatness. He achieved much in his 90 years of life but he did so with genuine humility.

Born Isaac Muffarrij in an ancient village in the north of Lebanon, his parents Khalil and Katrine, his grandparents and two of his great-grandparents all came from the same small village. They were humble, unpretentious beginnings.

His father initially migrated to Australia in 1891 at the age of 16 and became a naturalised citizen in 1901. He came to make a better life and establish himself before returning to Lebanon to marry.

With a Lebanese friend Khalil bought McGuire Brothers, a woolbroking firm, in Goulburn, NSW. He had the foresight to change his name so it matched the business, thus the family name, Muffarrij, became McGuire.

After a few years he left the business and set up his own in Burruga, south of Bathurst.

In 1914, Khalil returned to Lebanon to visit his sick mother. He married Katrine Jeha in 1923 and Labeeb was born the following year. When he was six months old, Labeeb and his parents sailed to Australia.

Although he was christened Isaac, after his paternal grandfather, his parents were convinced by other passengers on board that a different name would be more appropriate in their new country. And so it was decided a collection of Lebanese and English names would be placed into a hat. Labeeb placed his tiny hand in the hat and drew out his new Christian name – Labeeb.

However, he was always immensely proud of his Lebanese heritage.

The family stayed with relatives in Sydney for a while before moving to Mt Morgan in late 1925, where Khalil had bought a drapery business.

Three more children, Fred, Phillip and Linda, were all born in the central Queensland town. They lived within sight of the gold mine with its slag heaps that glowed red at night. They had no electricity and no refrigeration and the house was lit by gaslight.

Labeeb's formative years were primitive but happy – playing cricket, which became a life-long passion, working in the family drapery store after school and attending Sunday school.

In 1936, the family moved to Rockhampton, where life was a little more luxurious. They established a drapery business and moved into a large Queensland, with a lawn tennis court at the rear of the property.



Labeeb was keen to learn and excelled as a student. His academic ability was fostered and encouraged by his high school teacher, Andy Thompson, who instilled in him an appreciation of good English and the "word music" of Shakespeare and the great poets. He also had a profound influence on the course of Labeeb's life.

Labeeb's father wanted him to study bookkeeping and join the family business, however, his teacher recognised that his talents lay elsewhere and, after much negotiation, convinced his father Labeeb should apply to study medicine.

Labeeb rose to the challenge, became dux of his senior year and was accepted into the

faculty of medicine at Sydney University. In 1941, aged 16, Labeeb relocated to St Paul's College and commenced his medical studies.

This was a daunting and anxious time for the young student and his sense of displacement was felt, particularly in his first year at university, largely because he was not a typical medical student; he was not Anglo-Saxon and he was not from a private school on Sydney's north shore.

He had to earn the acceptance of his fellow students and he did this during a college cricket match. A talented spin bowler, Labeeb watched as his higher order batsmen were dismissed at the hands of two

fast bowlers. The first ball he faced was a bouncer, it rose sharply and knocked out his front teeth. Despite being battered and bloodied, he batted on and made the highest score, not out, at the end of the innings.

That incident softened the attitude of the other students towards him and he settled in to university life. He graduated in 1946 with a Bachelor of Medicine, Bachelor of Surgery, after which he returned to Brisbane where he began practice at the RBH, an institution he served for almost 40 years.

Some of his remarkable achievements included surgical registrar at the Royal Brisbane Hospital; visiting surgeon at RBH; lectured in surgery at the faculty of dentistry, University of Queensland; lectured at the Australian College of Nursing; lecturer in surgical anatomy at the Queensland Institute of Technology; lecturer in surgical nursing at RBH; tutor in clinical surgery, UQ; demonstrator in surgical anatomy, UQ and director of the post-graduate medical education committee at the university.

Before he retired from the RBH in 1984 he published the hospital's surgical history. Labeeb continued in private practice until 1997.

He also researched the history of his ancestors – the Phoenicians and the Carthaginians – and was interested in Australian history.

In 1951, Labeeb was diagnosed with tuberculosis. He was required to postpone his career for six months while he recuperated in the Blue Mountains. Had it not been for that

delay he may never have met David Thatcher, a fellow anatomy demonstrator, after he returned from convalescence.

David had a sister-in-law, Ruth Rennie, and was keen to set her up with Labeeb. The dinner date worked and, in 1960, Labeeb and Ruth married. They had three sons and built a house in Constitution Rd, Windsor, where they lived for the rest of their married life.

Although he loved to travel and explore the world, Labeeb was at his most relaxed at the family beach houses at Bribie Island and Kirra, where he loved to do little more than going for a morning swim, followed by a game of beach cricket with his sons, after which he would retire to the house to watch a Test match and read a good book.

A devout Christian, he was a member of the congregation of St Andrew's Uniting Church in Ann St for almost 40 years. Through his faith, he had no fear of death.

He once wrote: "We are what we are, and who we are, because of our heredity, our environment and our personal efforts."

Labeeb made the most of the opportunities available to him. Although heredity, his humble beginnings and chance all played their part, it was largely through his personal efforts that he rose, quietly, to greatness. He was made all the greater by his unpretentiousness despite his achievements.

He is survived by Ruth, his wife of 55 years; sons John, Paul and Mark; 10 grandchildren, and his sister Linda.

MCGUIRE FAMILY