**AGENDA ITEM 1.8**

**OBITUARY**

**MR ALAN MORTON CUTHBERTSON FRACS  
GENERAL SURGEON  
23 OCTOBER 1929 – 2 NOVEMBER 2021**

The mention of colorectal surgery is sometimes greeted by a degree of mirth even from apparently educated members of the medical profession. This is surprising as it is one of the most difficult and challenging of surgical specialties and one in which technical expertise is critical to the eradication of cancer and the avoidance of serious postoperative morbidity.

Alan Cuthbertson FRACS, who passed away peacefully on November 2nd at the age of 92, was a member of the Royal Melbourne Hospital Senior Medical Staff from 1962 to 1989. He was a wise and gifted colorectal surgeon who practised and taught the essential skills that benefitted countless patients of his own and the patients of his trainees who were fortunate enough to have him as their teacher.

Alan grew up with his family in Ranfurlie Crescent, Glen Iris. His future wife, Janet, born on the same day a year after Alan, lived with her family on the same street. He attended Scotch College in Hawthorn, with dreams of becoming a farmer but without the means to buy a property, his parents encouraged him to apply for university. He was accepted by the University of Melbourne to study medicine and developed lifelong friendships with Scotty Macleish (a future President of our College), Skip Martin and Bob Cook - all of them destined to become highly respected members of the Senior Medical Staff at RMH.

He played football for Scotch and then for University Blacks. Richmond legend Jack Dyer wanted him to try out with the Tigers, but by this time, Alan saw his future in surgery, not football. Alan married Janet in his final year of medical school and graduated MBBS in 1954. He was appointed as Junior Resident Medical Officer at Royal Melbourne the following year, commenced training in general surgery and obtained his Fellowship (FRACS) in 1959. Like so many Australian surgical trainees, he travelled to the United Kingdom where he was appointed General Surgical Registrar at West Middlesex Hospital.

By then he had decided to undertake specialist training in colon and rectal surgery, hopefully under the tutelage of Rupert Turnbull at the Cleveland Clinic in the USA. Having read in the Times that the equally famous Clinic surgeon, Dr George Crile Jr, was visiting London and staying at the Savoy, Alan called the hotel and asked to be put through. A bemused Crile asked Alan to be at the appropriately name American Bar of the Savoy in an hour. On meeting Cuthbertson, Crile explained that positions with Turnbull were almost impossible to obtain but one approach might be to take the Vascular Surgery Chief Resident post at Cleveland, vacant again because of the almost impossible demands the unrelenting vascular surgeons put on their Chief Residents. Crile opined to a somewhat sceptical Cuthbertson that if he could complete the Vascular Surgery term, he might get the post with Turnbull. Alan “survived” and was rewarded with the Colorectal Surgery job the following year.

It was at this time that Turnbull adopted the so called “pull through” operation for rectal cancer and Alan saw its potential. He and Turnbull published the results of that experience in 1961 and on his return to Australia in 1962, he introduced it to Melbourne. This was the operation that paved the way for all subsequent procedures (facilitated by the later development of the circular surgical stapler) that allowed most patients with rectal cancer to avoid a permanent colostomy.

He was appointed Surgeon to Outpatients at Royal Melbourne that year. This position described the surgeon who did most of the “on call” or emergency surgery but was only “given” the more desirable elective cases at the whim of the Head of Unit. His prowess as a surgeon however soon became obvious and in 1965 he was appointed Team Leader of an Australian Surgical Team to Vietnam. Although his practice quickly became predominantly colorectal surgery, he was appointed Head of a General Surgery Unit at RMH in 1974. He was appointed Chairman of the Section of Colon and Rectal Surgery of RACS in 1976 although subspecialties such as colorectal surgery were still not accepted by most general surgeons of the time.

However, against this resistance and with commendable foresight, Royal Melbourne established one of the first Specialist Colorectal Surgery Units in the country and in 1982 appointed Alan as the inaugural Head of Unit, a position he held until his retirement in 1989.

Alan was the type of surgeon whose surgical technique was neither flamboyant nor hurried but an absence of wasted or repetitive movements meant he completed operations in about half the time it took his colleagues to perform the same procedure. In an era when it was usual to cross match four units of blood for patients undergoing rectal cancer surgery, this was unnecessary for him as he operated in a seemingly bloodless pelvic plane. Cuthbertson understood the pathology of rectal cancer and that if not performed with meticulous surgical technique, the incidence of recurrent cancer in the pelvis could be as high as 50%, committing those patients to terrible symptoms and premature death. In fact, Alan had been performing rectal cancer surgery using these principles for many years before it was popularized in the UK and Europe in the 1980s as Total Mesorectal Excsion (TME).

Alan was a superb and generous surgical teacher and for his trainees, it was a joy to watch him undertake difficult pelvic surgery. His technique of dividing the inferior mesenteric vein inferior to the pancreas to allow the colon to reach the pelvis was until then little used but was decisive in ensuring anastomotic integrity. This was one of those priceless “pearls of wisdom” that Alan was so good at sharing.

Alan had a long association with the University of Melbourne and was appointed as Lecturer in Pathology, a position which helped many registrars prepare for the FRACS examination. He was the Chair of the University of Melbourne Colorectal Surgery Research group that was well ahead of its time in undertaking clinical trials in the specialty. Perhaps the high point of his University activity was his appointment as Dean of the Royal Melbourne Clinical School in 1986.

He joined Bill Hughes in a private colorectal surgery practice at Cabrini Medical Centre in Malvern and in 1983 in another landmark contribution to the specialty, Cuthbertson and Hughes combined with Mark Killingback from Sydney to produce the outstanding textbook Colorectal Surgery. It was, as the authors intended, concise, relevant, well illustrated and a “go to” resource for surgical trainees.

Alan retired in 1990 to pursue the other love of his life - to be on the land with his wife Janet. They built a mud brick house on 650 acres they bought south of Yea on the Murrindindi Road. They ran cattle and planted a vineyard. As one of the early surgeon wine makers, he was justifiably proud of his award winning Murrindindi Chardonnay. When bushfires threatened in 2009, he and Janet, at no small risk, chose to stay and defend and saved their home. By then, old football injuries had taken their toll on his knees and he managed the property with the help of a motor bike. To his chagrin, he developed atrial fibrillation requiring treatment with warfarin. Sensibly, it was pointed out that warfarin and a motorbike were incompatible and that his days on the bike were over. Because of that, his days on the land were also over. He and Janet retired to Lorne and later returned to Melbourne to be closer to their growing family. Janet’s passing on Australia Day in 2017 was a huge loss but he was supported by his four children and their partners and was constantly visited and entertained by his eleven grandchildren and three great grandchildren.

Alan Cuthbertson was a modest man, perhaps an unusual trait in surgeons these days. He cared deeply about the welfare of his patients and was a generous colleague and friend to many. He truly deserves to be remembered as a surgical pioneer and has left a magnificent legacy to his patients, trainees and to the specialty of colorectal surgery.

*The obituary was written and provided by Campbell Penfold and Ian Jones (respectively the second and third Heads of the RMH Colorectal Surgery Unit)*