

Patrick William Cotter

Pat[rick] Cotter died on 26 June 2012 after suffering a massive stroke the night before. He was 3 weeks short of his 93rd birthday and had led an active and productive life up until that time.



Pat was born in Runanga in 1919, the son of William Makuri and Sophie Cotter. At this time his father was the GP and he knew well many of the eventual leaders of the Labour Party who 15 years later became Cabinet Ministers in the first Labour Government. A year or two later his parents took Pat and his younger sister to the UK where Bill undertook surgical training. After a short time Pat was brought back by an aunt to live with his Aunt Con and his grandmother on a farm in Pahiatua until his parents returned in 1926 when Pat was 7; he barely knew them.

Pat was educated briefly at St Mary's Convent and then at Fendalton School, entering Christ's College in 1933 and leaving in 1937 in which year he was a House Prefect, Captain of Swimming and in the Athletics team and 2nd Rowing Four. He took Medical Intermediate at Canterbury University College and entered the Otago Medical School in 1939 together with no less than 17 boys from the same 6th Form year at Christ's College.

At Otago he rowed in the University VIII and he joined the Otago University Medical Company and went to numerous camps in his holidays. He was commissioned 2nd Lieutenant in 1942, his 5th year of the medical course. After graduating MB ChB at the end of 1943 he spent a year as House Surgeon in Christchurch and in 1945 he was posted in the NZMC to Fiji with the rank of Captain. He returned to New Zealand in 1946 leaving the Army and in January 1947 married Prudence (Prue) Mary Pottinger from Wellington and went to London by ship in March; Prue following 2 months later.

He studied for the Primary Examination and passed it and then attended courses and lectures at Guy's, St Thomas' and the Royal College of Surgeons and Clinics with Stanford Cade, Norman Tanner and others and did locum jobs at St Peter's and Great Ormond Street and a Registrar job at St Giles, Denmark Hill, before passing the Final FRCS in 1949.

They now had two children and returned to Christchurch to be Senior Surgical Registrar in 1950–51. He then moved into private practice in rooms with his father and did private surgery, brief GP locums and Insurance work.

He became FRACS in 1955 and was appointed to Burwood Hospital on a small number of sessions the following year. Upon the opening of The Princess Margaret Hospital in 1960 Pat was appointed to a General Surgical position there.

In 1963 he moved to Christchurch Hospital where he formed a surgical “team” with Rob Davidson until his retirement in 1985.

Pat Cotter’s contributions to medicine in general and surgery in particular were immense.

He was on the Canterbury Divisional Committee of the NZMA for 10 years, was Delegate to Council and was on the Central Specialists’ Committee and was Treasurer for the Biennial Meeting of NZMA in 1979. He spent 6 years on the Editorial Committee of the *New Zealand Medical Journal*. He was Publicity Officer for the 1982 General Scientific Meeting in Christchurch.

He was too busy to publish much but a most important piece of work was the publication, with Derek Hart and Bill Macbeth, of the results of a study of the levels of blood alcohol in patients involved in motor vehicle accidents. He took his findings to present to a Select Committee of the House and legislation followed in due course. The genesis of this study lay in one of his many visits to “Bill” Hughes (later Sir Edward and President of the College) in Melbourne. They became firm friends.

The Royal Australasian College of Surgeons was an abiding interest. He was a member of the NZ Committee for 10 years, on the Court of Examiners for 8 years, Joint Secretary of the Annual Scientific Meeting in Christchurch in 1966 and organised a successful ASM in Fiji in 1970.

He had a special regard for Fiji and its people from his time there at the end of the War, and returned to help with teaching and operating on a number of occasions over the years.

Pat developed a very busy Private Surgical Practice based on great service especially to the country GPs and their patients. His greatest service to private surgery itself was the founding (in 1960) of the Surgeons’ and Anaesthetists’ Instrument Pool which eliminated the chaotic system of each surgeon turning up to operate at a private hospital with a bag of instruments which then required sterilisation.

So on a given weekend every surgeon brought his instruments on which his initials were engraved (lest he should want them back) and these were sorted into sets and kept sterilised and ready for use for a small fee. Furthermore operations were arranged in lists at given times and days and the system was rationalised. Pat and Keith Drayton ran the Pool until they retired.

Pat was one of the “dissident coterie” of members of the Medical Assurance Society who realised that all was far from well and, against strenuous opposition from the then Directors, changed the entire culture and direction of the struggling Society into a sound business for which many, especially in Christchurch, are presently extremely grateful. He continued as a Director from 1972 to 1980.

Pat developed an early interest in Medical Education through the Branch Faculty which eventually became the Christchurch Clinical School of Medicine and finally the Christchurch School of Medicine of the University of Otago. He served on the Joint Relationships Committee of Branch Faculty and Hospital Board and was the one of the so-called “Gang of Four” with Don Beaven, Fred Shannon and George Rolleston in the Chair who met with increasing frequency from 1967 to 1972 to plan the teaching facility.

It was a remarkable achievement to have the School up and running for student entry in 1973. His outstanding contribution was to the Canterbury Medical Library which he served for 30 years, latterly as Chairman, and eventually handed it over to the University as a flourishing concern firmly embedded in the heart of the School.

Amongst his medical activities, Pat had several other interests which he pursued with equal vigour. His father introduced him to a real-estate friend who guided him in the purchase of commercial property and he bought, built and owned many properties in association with his son Paddy, including farm developments on Banks Peninsula. He was the Chairman of a number of companies. He developed an enthusiasm for and great knowledge of silviculture and particularly Farm Forestry.

In 1960 Pat and Prue bought a bare section at Charteris Bay in the Lyttelton Harbour and built a holiday cottage and developed the steep hillside with paths, steps, dry rock walls and much planting of all sorts of trees and shrubs. If he ever went down to the foreshore it was usually armed with a crowbar, to rearrange the rocks into bathing pools and generally tidy up!

Then he leased a peninsula opposite and planted it entirely in a stand of *Pinus radiata* trees which is now mature and has been sold.

Finally in 1980 they bought land at Pigeon Bay where Pat could give full rein to the ideas he had been developing in association with other keen and knowledgeable tree men and planted a great variety of trees both in close forestry and more spread out in Farm Forestry fashion and employing a farm manager to take care of the stock.

They built a beautiful cottage to replace the old wooden house with a view down the Bay to the sea and surrounded it with rhododendrons, fruit trees, flowers of all descriptions and lots of tree lucerne to encourage the wood pigeons. In the midst of all this splendour Pat and Prue celebrated their 60th wedding anniversary in January 2007.

In the early 1980s Dr Ross Fairgray asked Pat, who was a well-known hoarder, to form a Committee to collect “Items of Historic Interest” of a medical nature, fearing that the new management engendered by the Health Reforms might be inclined to dispose of our medical history.

The collection grew apace and a means of looking after it long-term was needed so Pat and Prue settled the Cotter Medical History Trust, to “collect, preserve and display” items of an historic medical nature. Many permanent displays have been placed; an outstanding collection of old microscopes has been purchased; many books have been catalogued and photographs and plans identified and filed, by a loyal and enthusiastic band of volunteers inspired by Pat.

He has also documented the lives of many doctors mostly but not exclusively in Canterbury and there are now about 1000, many of which have been archived nationally.

Pat was never a man for the limelight but he received two Awards late in life which pleased him. The first was the Christchurch Civic Award which was given in 2005 for his work with the Medical History Trust. The other was his appointment as Officer of the New Zealand Order of Merit in 2009 (see photograph).

Pat Cotter was a splendid colleague. Everything that he did was thoroughly researched, properly executed and carried through to a satisfactory conclusion. As his son Christopher said at his funeral “ Pat was a complex individual. He was opinionated and outspoken...He was fiercely focussed...and to an extent obsessive. At the same time he could be remarkably generous and extraordinarily parsimonious”.

Prue has been a tower of strength especially in these last years when one eye had been removed and the other failing. His balance was bad but his brain was still remarkably agile.

Our sympathy is extended to her and to his children, Christopher, Kate, Paddy and Jane, his 14 grandchildren and one great grandchild.

Mr Rob Davidson, a colleague and friend of Mr Pat Cotter, wrote this obituary.