

## G A (Don) Harrison

“He taught”

Don Harrison, intensive care clinician, innovator and teacher, died at home on 10 October 2007 with his devoted and much loved wife, Suzie. He was born on 3 November 1931 in Paddington, Sydney, and he and his sister, Lillian, were raised mainly in the St George district. Theirs was a close, working-class family with a life that was not easy in that post-Depression time, especially after Don's father died when Don was 8 years old. In later years, he maintained his connection with these roots with a love of the “Dragons”, the Labor Party and lamingtons.

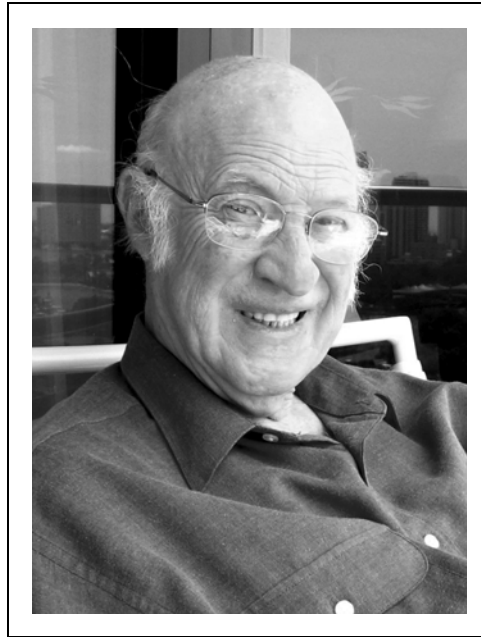
From a young age, Don wanted to become a doctor. He graduated in Medicine from the University of Sydney in 1955, assisted along the way by Legacy, Opportunity School, Canterbury Boys Selective High School and a Commonwealth Scholarship.

Don spent more than 50 years working at St Vincent's Hospital, Sydney. He started there in 1952 as a medical student, completed anaesthesia training there, and after gaining post-fellowship experience in Cardiff in the United Kingdom and in the United States, joined the senior medical staff in 1964. He served as Director of Cardiothoracic Intensive Care until 2003, and continued as Deputy Director of Anaesthesia, Coordinator of the Patient Safety Simulation Centre, and Conjoint Professor (Anaesthesia, Intensive Care and Emergency Medicine) at the University of New South Wales until his death aged 75. He will be remembered there as an excellent teacher of basic sciences, anaesthesia and intensive care, an innovator, a focused and persistent clinician, a humorous lecturer and an affable friend.

Don's contributions to many other organisations are best understood as threads that overlapped and intertwined over the years.

### Training: anaesthesia and intensive care

The 1970s were the beginning of Don's contribution to the specialties through the Faculty of Anaesthetists, as a Board member, Chairman of Examinations, Chairman of Primary Examination and Chairman of the Final Examina-



tion in Intensive Care. He made a major contribution to the “Objectives of Training” for Anaesthesia (1976) and then helped drive the “Objectives of Training” for Intensive Care (1984). As part of his work for a Masters in Health Personnel Education (University of New South Wales), he devised and ran the world's first specialist examination in intensive care medicine (ICM). The examination was first set in 1979 and remained unchanged until 1998, when Don also contributed to its later development. He continued to support and encourage ICM training and trainees until the last days of his life. The medal for the best performance at the Fellowship Examination bears his name and was usually presented by Don.

### Resuscitation

Don was a member of the Australian Resuscitation Council from 1987 to 1999 and Chairman from 1989 to 1993, during which time he reinvigorated the Council. He was also President of the Resuscitation Research Council of NSW, Chairman of the Medical Panel of World Life Saving and Medical Adviser to Surf Life Saving Australia and the Royal Life Saving Society of Australia.

He wrote many original seminal papers in the area of resuscitation. Recently, with Theresa Jacques he was studying ways in which early management of medical emergencies may be improved. Last year, they and colleagues wrote four important articles exploring better ways of predicting and managing medical emergencies within hospitals. Don backed this up by spending hours teaching with simulated scenarios in the patient simulation centre now renamed in his honour.

### Intensive care and anaesthesia practice

Don was a pioneer in cardiothoracic anaesthesia and intensive care. He practised and taught a high standard of anaesthesia, which he also disseminated in Asia as Visiting Professor to the National University of Singapore and the National Cardiac Centre of Indonesia.

## OBITUARIES

Hospital, university and ICM training bodies (Section, Faculty and Joint Faculty) all benefited from Don's labours, intellect and innovative thought. He received many awards and honours for his service to these bodies, including the First Lennard Travers Professorship (Faculty of Anaesthesia, Royal Australasian College of Surgeons [FARACS], 1972); Robert Orton Medal (FARACS, 1990); Australian Resuscitation Council Roll of Honour; World Life Saving Society Special Award (1990); and the Member of the Order of Australia, AM (1992).

A consistent feature of this work was Don's desire to improve patient survival and care through teaching, research and teamwork, while being a true gentleman and a mentor to many colleagues. Spasmodic dysphonia in his later years gave him another challenge and a characteristic voice, but it did not deter his teaching and communication skills.

Putting together a précis of Don's huge contribution to ICM is not easy, partly because of the diversity and magnitude of his work, but also because Don had too many projects on the boil or completed to be worried about keeping his CV up to date. Why would he need to? He had a job that he loved, he did not need to gloat over his list of achievements, and there was not enough time in the day.

The other problem with writing this rough sketch is that it is difficult to convey the fact that Don maintained the

pace of innovation and thought for more than 50 years. This story neglects his persistence and tenacity, constancy and longevity in the specialties. It forgets the hours of clinical work, College and Council meetings, the hours of examinations and writing and marking exam papers, the hours putting artificial vomit into masks and tubes to see how it affected their performance, the hours of teaching mouth-to-mouth resuscitation with manikins in dingy rooms, the calls back to the hospital and the hours worrying about patients. It neglects the other side of Don, his love of family, including his daughters Nerida, Nicole and Donna, and his humour. It also neglects the balance provided in his life by family time, reading, writing limericks, listening to jazz, playing a ferocious game of tennis and watching any game in which, as he said, "a ball is carried, kicked or thoroughly whacked".

Don was an amazing doctor and teacher. Suzie describes him as an extraordinary ordinary man.

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