

Robin Mackenzie Norris

9 March 1931–20 September 2015

MBChB, MD, FRACP, FRCP



Robin Mackenzie Norris died peacefully on 20 September 2015 at his home on the North Shore, Auckland, after a short illness. Robin was an outstanding doctor, researcher, teacher, and mentor.

Robin was born in Newcastle, UK, on 9 March 1931. His father, Alan John Norris, was a Commander in the Royal Navy and was stationed overseas for long periods, including Gibraltar for 3 years. There, Robin had a pet donkey called Betsy, and when they returned to the UK sadly, Betsy was left behind. After many tears and much fretting, the officers of the battleship H.M.S. Rodney transported Betsy to England. This occurred with much fanfare with articles and pictures in the UK newspapers.

Robin arrived in New Zealand at the age of 6 when his father was transferred on H.M.S. Leander. His mother, Molly, got a position as Matron at Queenswood School in Hastings and Robin went to school at Hereworth boarding school in Havelock North.

At the age of 10, Robin suffered a ruptured appendix followed by peritonitis. Despite treatment with sulphanilamide—the only antibiotic available—the infection spread and he developed sepsis of both hips and knees associated with severe pain

and muscle spasms. Gradually the joints stiffened. Almost 2 years after hospitalisation he returned to Auckland where he continued his correspondence lessons which he had started in hospital. Seven years after the onset of his acute appendicitis, assisted with funding by the Crippled Children's Society and the Government, he had three operations at Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston, Massachusetts, to free up movement in his hips. He stayed in Boston for 5 months while he underwent convalescence and rehabilitation. He subsequently required two walking sticks to help him walk.

On return from Boston, he went to Takapuna Grammar School and then Dunedin School of Medicine, University of Otago, Dunedin, where he graduated in 1955. After house surgeon appointments at Auckland and Middlemore Hospital and medical registrar attachments at Auckland Hospital, he travelled to London. He married Iris, a casualty department staff nurse in 1963. He was awarded an MD from Birmingham University in 1965 on the subject of 'the relative distribution of air and blood flow in the lungs'. He then returned to New Zealand as a junior medical specialist at Green Lane hospital and was subsequently

appointed director of research programmes by the Medical Research Council.

Robin was appointed physician in charge of the Coronary Care Unit at Green Lane Hospital from 1967 and Honorary Professor of Cardiovascular Therapeutics at the Auckland University School of Medicine (1980) until 1992, when he returned to the UK as Honorary Consultant Cardiologist at the Royal Sussex County Hospital, Brighton where he worked on the UK Myocardial Infarction National Audit Programme (MINAP) for 11 years.

Robin was the New Zealand representative on the Board of the Cardiac Society of Australia and New Zealand from 1990–92 and was made a life member in 2002. He became a fellow of the Society in 2004.

Robin's contributions to medicine and to patient care were enormous. He helped set up the first coronary care unit (CCU) in New Zealand at Green Lane Hospital with Dr Laurie Reynolds in 1967 at the time the coronary epidemic was at its height. The unit had four beds with monitoring and a waiting room for relatives. Many colleagues thought it was better to treat heart attack patients at home and "the psychological trauma of uprooting cardiac patients from their home surroundings and setting them in the midst of frightening electrical gadgets and any amount of scientific care would not be able to match the results of treating patients in their homes". Robin rounded every day in the CCU and came into hospital whenever a cardiac arrest occurred after hours in the CCU, general medical or surgical wards. He carefully followed patients for over 10 years after a heart attack, and developed what became known as the Norris index for predicting outcomes after heart attacks. He led several important studies at Green Lane with cardiology and cardiothoracic colleagues comparing patient outcomes with heart surgery and medical treatments. He was also a world leader in research, testing a number of approaches to reduce the size of heart attacks—particularly with beta blockers. His original insights and inspiration were pivotal to the work of colleagues at Oxford University, with the first International Study of Infarct Survival (ISIS) on the effects of the beta blocker atenolol on mortality.

He wrote over 200 original scientific papers, including anonymous editorials in the *Lancet*, predicting the future of coronary angioplasty. He also wrote an important book called *Myocardial Infarction: its presentation, pathogenesis and treatment*. It was really a book describing a personal odyssey of looking after heart attack patients with critical observations from his vast experience. The book was a notable contribution to our scientific knowledge about heart attacks, and over his career the mortality from heart attacks decreased 50%.

Robin was a great mentor and trained a number of registrars, funded by the New Zealand Medical Research Council (who work throughout the world), continuing Robin's legacy, providing excellent care to patients, as well as teaching and undertaking research. On hearing of his death, they all mentioned the fond memories they had of working with Robin, and how much they had learnt from him and the lessons that had stuck with them for the rest of their careers. Robin taught them to question and to challenge many of the so called truisms we have in medicine.

He also had much joy in teaching nurses and ran, along with others at Green Lane, a course for coronary care nurses for many years. Nurses often commented that "Dr Norris had taught them everything they knew about caring for heart patients."

Robin always had a patient-centred approach before it became an 'in-vogue term' and stated that "patients must never be made to feel guilty if they present as a false alarm when they come to hospital thinking they have had a heart attack".

Robin was very determined in everything he did, including always taking the stairs and not driving an automatic car. The experience of being a passenger with Robin was quite exhilarating, breath-taking, and something to behold. Robin had a strong Christian faith, and regularly attended St. Paul's by-the-Sea Anglican Church in Milford. He set up a trust to encourage an exchange program for young people to travel between St. Pauls and St. Mary the Virgin in Ringmer, East Sussex. He loved swimming, body surfing and playing with his grandchildren. All of whom have very

special memories of him. At his funeral one grandchild said, "I will never be able to play cricket as well without 'grand-père' supporting me."

Robin and Iris returned to New Zealand to retire in 2003; however, he always had a project he was undertaking. He did not stop contributing, writing to *The New Zealand Medical Journal* several times, and recently wrote a letter to the *Lancet*, about an issue that he has been passionate about, people dying with heart attacks in the community. He pointed out that too many patients die needlessly in the community from heart attacks before getting to hospital. And he made a plea for more research, for treatments to be directed to these patients, and noted that three-quarters of people who die from heart attacks under the age of 75 do so in the community.

Robin felt privileged being part of the Green Lane team. He recently instigated a museum project telling the story of Green Lane Hospital. This will begin at the Museum Of Transport and Technology (MOTAT) and it will tell the story of the people of Green Lane and the innovations and patient experiences. Many of the

exhibits will be interactive with the aim to teach the public about heart disease and its prevention.

The picture of Robin sitting in his office wearing a white coat (which he always wore), his locator in his pocket, beside him a bookshelf with his book and his beloved journals, the *Lancet* and *Circulation*, is a true likeness.

Robin was a visionary, an inspiration to many, a motivator, an outstanding researcher, a wonderful compassionate doctor, and a lovely man.

He has enhanced and enriched many lives and his legacy will live on.

Robin and Iris were a devoted couple. Robin nursed Iris during her long illness until her death in 2009.

Robin is survived by his sons Andrew and Richard, their wives Dianne and Jolanda, and beloved grandchildren Cordelia, Honor, Callum, Danielle and Vivien.

'To travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive' Robert
Louis Stevenson from *Virginibus*
Puerisque, 1881

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URL:

www.nzma.org.nz/journal/read-the-journal/all-issues/2010-2019/2015/vol-128-no-1427-18-december-2015/6773
