Charles Warrington Howden

MB ChB (NZ) 1940, FRCPE 1951, FRACP 1952, Dip Child Health (Lond) 1951

Charles Howden was born on Auckland's North Shore in 1918, the third of four boys, and died 93 years later on 28 March 2011, just 3 months after his wife of 65 years, Vida (nee McLean).

Charles went to Takapuna Grammar School from the family home in Castor Bay and in 1935 to Otago University Medical School.

He initially boarded at Knox College and graduated in 1940, the second year of the Second World War.

After a year as a house surgeon (he was one of five) at Waikato Hospital, in 1942, he and Vida were married but within 6 months Charles was posted as a Medical Officer to the RNZAF in the Pacific, to Fiji, then Bougainville and finally to the Admiralty Islands.

Charles was principally involved in setting up and working in small hospitals.

Returning to civilian life in 1945 he spent a year as a medical registrar at Waikato Hospital, travelling home to Vida and their first child, in Auckland, on spare weekends. Charles then joined James (Jimmy) Mackereth in general practice in Matamata for 4 years. This was a rural, mainly young people's practice, with many new families as men were 'demobbed' from the Services.

Charles and Jimmy each delivered about 250 babies a year and Charles gave anaesthetics for Jimmy's surgery. In 1951 and 1952, Charles took time out to travel to the UK for postgraduate training where he obtained FRCPE in Edinburgh and the Diploma of Child Health in London.

Charles returned to Matamata initially and then, in 1956, bought a general practice in Milford, North Shore where he also continued his obstetric practice.

In 1961 he joined his long-time friend Ruthven Lang as an adult and paediatric infectious disease physician at Auckland Hospital, later adding adult general medicine to his professional responsibilities. He eventually withdrew entirely from general practice in 1970. In the Infectious Disease Unit at Auckland Hospital and with Keitha Farmer soon appointed to the paediatric side, he and his colleagues cared for patients.
with less common infectious diseases of the times, like typhoid fever, poliomyelitis, tetanus and leprosy.

Over the years they looked after thousands of children with acute gastroenteritis, the great majority of whom were shown in the 1970s to be infected with the newly discovered rotaviruses. In 1983, aged 65 years, Charles retired from Auckland Hospital, initially helping out for 18 months at Whakatane Hospital as a general physician and then in 1985 becoming involved in the recently formed Geriatric Unit at North Shore Hospital. He finally retired from medical practice in his early 70s.

There were sporting genes and sporting culture in Charles’ family. His paternal grandfather, Charles Ritchie Howden, was one of the founders of Balmacewan Golf Club in Dunedin and Charles played to a single-figure handicap throughout his long golfing career.

His maternal grandfather, James Jimmy Graham, was the first Commodore of the Devonport Yacht Club. Throughout his life and with their young family Charles and Vida owned boats from dinghies to 30-foot keelers, and the Waitemata Harbour and further afield was their aquatic playground. Charles loved Milford and Takapuna beaches and ran and more latterly walked along Takapuna most days.

Charles’s career spanned a now vanished medical era: it was possible to be a true generalist in medicine in his day. Charles worked in general practice doing obstetrics and anaesthetics as well as standard general practice and in hospital, general medicine and infectious diseases including paediatric infectious diseases.

There was an irony for Charles that in the twilight of his career, at a time when he was practising geriatrics, the NZ Society of Paediatrics awarded him life membership of their Society in honour of his contribution to paediatric infectious disease and child health.

Charles was a tall, dignified and quiet man around the wards of Auckland Hospital with a dry and understated sense of humour. He provided wise counsel to younger physicians in an environment of increasingly mechanistic and investigative hospital medical care—he was a good listener, he was holistic in his approach when that term barely existed in medicine, and he was invariably kind to his patients.

Charles is survived by his 5 children, 11 grandchildren and 2 great grandchildren.

Rod Ellis-Pegler, Auckland, compiled this obituary with the help of Charles's family.