

# THE NEW ZEALAND MEDICAL JOURNAL

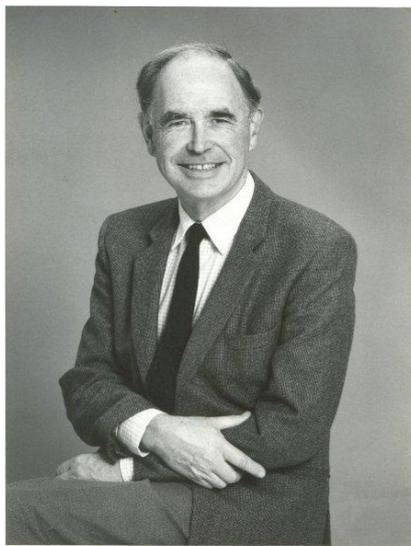
Journal of the New Zealand Medical Association



## Samuel Philip Wrightson

*20 February 1922 – 8 February 2011; MBE, BA(1942), MB, BChir(1945), MA(1946) (Camb.), FRCS (Edin.) 1948, FRACS*

Philip Wrightson was a neurosurgeon at Auckland Hospital from 1955 to 1987. He was an internationally acclaimed authority on concussion and a pioneer in the rehabilitation of head injury patients.



He was born in Darlington, England, where his father was the director of an engineering firm. He attended Aysgarth and Oundle Schools before entering Emmanuel College, Cambridge University. He studied natural sciences and then medicine. He received his clinical training at Newcastle General Hospital. After graduation he was a house surgeon in Darlington and then Surgical Registrar at Cherry Knowle Hospital, Northumberland for 18 months. After passing the FRCS examination in Edinburgh, he joined the surgical service of the Royal Air Force (RAF) and worked as an orthopaedic and general surgeon. While he was a medical officer in the RAF he met Prue Pumphrey, a physiotherapist from New Zealand.

They married in 1949 and 2 years later they came to New Zealand. He was a locum general surgeon at Taranaki Base and Wellington Hospitals and then was appointed as a general surgeon at Hutt Hospital.

In 1955 he successfully applied for a position as Junior Neurosurgeon at Auckland Hospital. He had no prior experience in neurosurgery and learnt from his two senior colleagues (Donald McKenzie and David Robertson) and from practical experience. In 1956 he was appointed Senior Neurosurgical Specialist and remained on the staff until he retired in 1987. He played a key role in the administration, and the clinical and educational activities of the Department of Neurosurgery. After visiting the Montreal Neurological Institute he introduced surgery for temporal lobe epilepsy to Auckland. He also developed the surgical treatment of pituitary tumours, first with implantation of radioactive seeds and later by transnasal surgery.

He was best known for his studies of the cognitive effects of mild head injury. Before the 1960s the prevailing opinion was that patients reporting persistent symptoms following mild head injury were either neurotic or malingering. This point-of-view was supported by the lack of abnormalities on the neurological examination and standard tests of mental function.

Dr Dorothy Gronwall, a neuropsychologist, devised the paced auditory serial addition test (PASAT) as a measure of the rate of information processing. Using the PASAT, Wrightson and Gronwall demonstrated slowing of cognitive processes following mild

head injuries. These studies were reported in the *Lancet* and have been acclaimed as landmark contributions on the subject.

Wrightson and his colleagues published other papers and two influential monographs on head injury: *Head injury: the facts: a guide for families and care-givers* (1990) and *Mild head injury: a guide to management* (Oxford University Press, 1999). He was a powerful advocate for appropriate rehabilitation following head injury. Wrightson and Gronwall established the first outpatient rehabilitation programme for patients suffering from concussion. He was the first patron of the Brain Injury Association.

Wrightson and Professor Val Chapman played a key role in establishing the New Zealand Neurological Foundation in 1976. Wrightson was the first Chairman of the Scientific Advisory Committee and the Foundation's Medical Director from 1983 to 1994. In 1997 the Foundation named a Post-doctoral Fellowship in his honour.

He served two terms as the President of the Neurological Association of New Zealand and was President of the Neurosurgical Society of Australasia from 1982–83. He was a Foundation Fellow of the Australasian Faculty of Rehabilitation Medicine. A Centre of Excellence established to develop and promote national standards in rehabilitation was named in his honour. In 1984 he received an MBE.

By nature he was serious, but he commanded a masterly use of puns. He was tall, gentlemanly in manner and softly spoken. On the few occasions when he was angry, the volume of his voice barely increased, but the biting sarcasm was unmistakable. His clinical decisions were made with great care and thought. His patients and their families remember him with immense gratitude and respect for his skill, devotion, patience and compassion.

After retirement he remained active in the affairs of the Neurological Foundation and in matters relating to head injuries. His advice and reports helped overturn Kevin Callan's conviction for murdering a 4 year-old child by shaking in England. He played the clarinet and piano and he was a skilled craftsman. He built himself a harpsichord.

Philip's health deteriorated after Prue died in 2009 and he died on 8 February 2011 from a cerebellar haemorrhage. He will be greatly missed by his son Matthew, daughter Amala, and his grand-children and great-grandchildren.

Dr Neil Anderson (Neurologist, Auckland City Hospital) wrote this obituary.