

George Salmond

14 October 1937–2 April 2019



Former Director General of Health

George Salmond died peacefully at home on 2 April 2019 at the age of 81. While he first specialised in older people's medicine, George was a health polymath, and public health, broadly construed, was his abiding passion.

George combined data and evidence with compassion and people. He humanised data. George started working for the Department of Health in 1971. As head of the Department's Management Services and Research Unit he carried out numerous projects, including the Porirua project—this was pivotal for him in illustrating the inverse care law graphically—those with most need for health services received the least, and those with least need received the most. Also, he worked with epidemiologist Judy Reinken who produced the Health and Equity score—work that foreshadowed the subsequent production of NZDep.

George was a strong, principled and wise leader of the health system as Director General of Health (1986–1991), working with four Ministers of Health: Michael Bassett, David Caygill, Helen Clark and Simon Upton, and it was his principled approach to this

most senior of roles that led him to resign from the position in 1991. 'Free and frank' advice had to be evidence-based. George's time as Director-General was marked by a number of dominating issues: AIDS; the Cartwright inquiry; the Mason inquiry; the Gibbs report into the structure of the health service. The large department underwent two major restructurings, and district offices and hospital boards became area health boards.

George was also an inspirational and influential academic leader. In 1993 he was appointed as Director of the Health Services Research Centre at Victoria University of Wellington (1993–1999). The Centre has gone from strength to strength over the past 25 years. George led the Health Research Council application that resulted in the funding of the original NZDep91 research project. In this and much of his research he was greatly supported by his wife Clare, a skilled statistician.

George was also an internationalist. In all, he attended six World Health Assemblies (WHAs), and he was a member of the New Zealand delegation to the International Conference on Primary Health Care, Alma

Ata, USSR, in 1978. This was one of the most significant health conferences of all time—primary healthcare was the means by which ‘Health for All’ was to be achieved by the year 2000. George was always acutely aware of the significance of Alma Ata, and it strongly foreshadowed aspects of the subsequent primary care reforms in New Zealand.

His key achievement internationally was his contribution to the World Court Project that ruled on the legal status of nuclear weapons. He was perfectly suited for this role given his detailed knowledge of how WHAs worked. So when George had left the Ministry of Health he joined in the International Physicians for Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW) delegation in Geneva. The delegation included George and Erich Geiringer from New Zealand, and the team leader, Ann Marie Janson, from Sweden. The first attempt to get the WHA to ask the World Court for clarifications regarding the legal status of nuclear weapons in 1992 failed to gain sufficient support. They tried again in 1993, again with an effort that involved very intensive advocacy in Geneva that faced strong opposition from the nuclear-armed states. This time they succeeded and the WHA did ask an advisory opinion from the World Court. After three years, in 1996 the World Court findings were announced, and these clearly supported the illegality of the threat to use, and use of, nuclear weapons except in extreme circumstances where the very survival of the state would be at stake. Without George’s knowledge of the workings of the WHA, and his contribution to the on-the-ground diplomacy, it is possible that this World Court ruling may not have eventuated. He certainly felt that this was his biggest contribution to public health in his lifetime.

George’s contribution to the profession over the years has been huge and he has held many leadership positions—from the early days of the formation of the New Zealand College of Community Medicine, through the time as the New Zealand

Regional Committee of the Australasian Faculty of Public Health Medicine, and on to the establishment of the New Zealand College of Public Health Medicine in its current form. In 2017 George was awarded a Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit for his services to Health.

The Public Health Association awarded George Salmond its Public Health Champion award in 2001 for his involvement in public health over more than 40 years.

In his so-called retirement George became a trustee of the Hamilton-based Wise Trust, with national reach overseeing a variety of mental disability related services. From 2000 to 2013 he chaired the board of the Blueprint Trust (now Blueprint NZ Ltd)—a private training organisation within the Wise group that provides a range of education and training services mainly, but not exclusively, for the mental health sector. He was also on the board of Te Pou Ltd from 2007 to 2014—this is also in the Wise group and supports organisations to develop their workforce. He was a member of the governmental Health Workforce Advisory Committee set up in 2001.

Despite filling many different roles in the country’s health sector, perhaps the most telling detail about this man is that he said he felt most happy in one of his earliest roles, in Porirua. His later devotion to meetings every Thursday morning at a café there, passionately discussing the current healthcare issues and the access of lower socioeconomic families to good healthcare, was an ongoing demonstration of his loyalty and commitment to connecting our sector with its communities.

With his inspiration and leadership, and his commitment to equity, over four-plus decades George Salmond made an incredible contribution to public service and public health in New Zealand and internationally.

George is dearly missed by his wife, Clare Salmond, and his three children.

Author information:

This obituary was written by Peter Crampton, Nick Wilson, Helen Bichan and John Martin, with input from his family.

URL:

<http://www.nzma.org.nz/journal/read-the-journal/all-issues/2010-2019/2019/vol-132-no-1496-7-june-2019/7903>
