

This is the unedited version of a column which appeared in *Australian Doctor* in 2003. Minor changes may have been made to the published piece.

Media Bites: Lessons from the top

Somewhere in my computer's brain, hundreds of thousands of words are stored. They are the notes taken while researching a series of profiles for this magazine of prominent people in health and medicine.

Of all those words, a handful are etched into my brain. They came from the University of Newcastle's Professor Rob Sanson-Fisher, when asked to comment on one of his colleagues.

The colleague's strengths were, as for us all, also a reflection of her weaknesses, he said. Demand for excellence, for example, could be exasperating. People who are passionate or intelligent could sometimes reject others' views.

As he spoke, it was as if the proverbial light bulb had been switched on. His comment has since proven useful advice in all sorts of scenarios, whether examining myself or others.

The other thing which has really struck me, when prying into the lives of high achievers, is how many are the offspring of families who arrived in Australia, often traumatised, in the aftermath of World War Two.

Sir Gus Nossal, the big man of medical science, fled with his family from Austria and couldn't speak a word of English when he started school in Sydney. His grandmother was lost to the concentration camps.

Family planning guru, Dr Edith Weisberg, is another who lost family to the Holocaust, and faced many difficult challenges early in life.

Professor Peter Brooks, mover and shaker at Queensland University, left England as a young boy. His father, a Quaker, had refused to fight during World War Two.

Dr Ingrid Van Beek, prominent for her work with drug users, credits her father for inspiring her sense of social justice. Her parents migrated from

Holland where her father had been a member of the Dutch Resistance during the Nazi occupation.

Dr Martin Van Der Weyden, editor of The Medical Journal of Australia, was a young boy when his family arrived in Australia, spending several months in an immigrant camp in Bathurst.

Many other high achievers have similar backgrounds. I can't help thinking that Australia's current failure to embrace those fleeing strife in their own countries has a huge cost at many levels. Given half a chance and a bit of support, many of their children would be the high achievers of tomorrow.

I have also come to wonder what it is about the health sector which attracts such wonderfully eccentric characters, creating rich pickings for profile-writers.

Here I think of Professor John Pearn, the Brisbane paediatrician and tireless author of medical history. His favourite time is 5am to 7.30am, which is set aside for writing, seven days a week.

Country GP and tree-lover, Dr Col Owen, is another with a gift for words. He introduced me to "copacetic". (It means "fine and splendid", an apt description for the gent himself).

The late Dr Struan Sutherland was as famous for his wit as for his antivenom research. You can guess which former health minister he once described as a "slightly obese but contented fox".

The other thing I have learnt is that high achievers - and their spouses - often pay a high price. They tend to be driven and take on a workload which others might consider insane.

You know what they say about strengths and weaknesses...