

**This is the unedited version of a column which appeared in *Australian Doctor* in 2005. Minor changes may have been made to the published piece.**

### **Media Bites: Living well and long**

Tom Reeve is sitting in the small office at the Australian Cancer Network in Sydney that he shares with the man who was once his protégée and is now his boss. Some of his favourite philosophical quotations are pasted in large print on the wall behind him.

His brown eyes are sharp behind his glasses as he considers how it came about that here he is, at 81, feeling as “fit as a flea” and putting in a working week which would be impressive at any age.

Professor Reeve retired as professor of surgery at the University of Sydney in 1988, but perhaps history will record that it has been his work in the years after his alleged retirement that has had the widest impact.

As executive officer of the ACN, and now its senior medical advisor, Professor Reeve has been leading the development of clinical practice guidelines in Australia, many of which have also been translated into other languages and had a significant impact internationally.

It is a task which, as you might imagine, has required the skills of a diplomat. He remembers the first meeting for the early management of breast cancer guidelines producing a din like the “Tower of Babel”.

“I went home to my wife and said, ‘honey we won’t get anywhere with this’,” he remembers.

“But it rapidly changed and developed. A wider body of people than you think have come to accept evidence.”

Professor Reeve did his last operation just before his 70th birthday, but continues to regularly assist his successor Professor Leigh Delbridge. “As an assistant I have been able to observe the anatomy more fully, which has led to some good papers on thyroid anatomy,” he says with some satisfaction.

Conscious of the march of time, Professor Reeve recently confronted his boss at the ACN and long-time friend, Professor Bruce Barraclough. “I said, ‘if I am ever off the boil, I want to know. Don’t ask me, just throw me out’.”

But back to that question, which so inevitably confronts those who reach a ripe age with their faculties still firing. What is the secret - surely there must be more than just good genes and luck involved?

Professor Reeve has never belonged to the category of people that he describes, with perhaps just a hint of disdain, as “fitness cranks”.

He never hankered for exercise for the sake of it, or had much of what he calls “a good ball sense”. He has always walked, but mainly as a means of getting around - to the train, or from one part of the hospital to another.

He pays great credit to his home’s design. The living quarters are upstairs and the bedrooms are downstairs, meaning every day involves many steps. “I believe the stairs have contributed to the good health of myself and my wife, that is pure happenstance.”

He is an avid reader - the bedside table is piled high - and says he is fortunate to have been “surrounded by people with intellect”. He also pays credit to the forbearance and support of his wife, Mary Jo.

Professor Reeve recently summarised his long career in an article in The Medical Journal of Australia. It hints at the laconic sense of humour which is more evident in the flesh.

Asked if Mary Jo might be prepared to have a chat for this article, he replies: “I am sure she would - she will talk to anyone. She is a very outspoken young woman. She’s also a very well known lady where I live.”

The dry humour seems to run in the family. “I hope he dies with his boots on,” says Mary Jo when asked about her husband’s enduring capacity for work, “because I couldn’t stand if he was at home.”

More seriously, she describes her husband’s commitment to patients as being almost a ‘religion’.

The other thing that strikes you about the man is that he clearly is doing what he loves. “You are not a workaholic if you enjoy the work,” he says.

It seems timely advice for the rest of us facing the onslaught of another year. Enjoy.