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The Profile: Col Owen

CV

- 1999 Queen's Birthday award, Officer in the general division of the Order of Australia
- 1998 FACRRM
- 1997 Chairman, Board of Management, Australian College of Rural Medicine
- 1996 FRCGP
- 1994-6 President RACGP
- 1991 Foundation President, Rural Doctors Association of Australia
- 1990 FAMA
- 1989 Foundation President, Rural Doctors Association of Queensland
- 1977 Dip Obstet, RCOG
- 1975 FRACGP
- 1968 Starts general practice at Inglewood, part-time superintendent at local hospital
- 1964-7 Superintendent, Charleville Hospital
- 1963 Graduates, University of Queensland

MAN OF TREES

Some of the best stories about Col Owen - the country GP, medico-politician and greenie - are told by his children. When they were growing up, the whole family voted on important decisions - like what to watch on TV or which breed of cattle to buy.

The youngest daughter, Katie Baker, now 28, laughs about how her father used to persuade the smallest of his five children to vote his way, so that his vote would carry the day.

When they were too young to know better, the children were proud of their democracy. Their mother, Gesine, says it was more like "a benign dictatorship".

The children describe Wednesday afternoon family sports competitions with great affection. Their dad knocked off early to join in the football, cricket, softball or hockey - and he never gave an inch.

“Despite being such a nice guy, he’s got a keen competitive streak,” says son Jim Owen, 31, a police officer on the Gold Coast.

Katie adds: “When we had grown up, the only swimming race that he could win was the underwater race and so for years we had that.”

Sports afternoon was followed by family quiz night. The kids were given a list of topics and questions in advance, and were expected to know the answers.

“I still know most of the capitals of the countries in the world,” says Jim. And Owen still loves to quiz his children about new words he has discovered.

His latest, as readers of his regular columns in Australian Doctor and other publications might realise, is “copacetic”. “It’s a lovely word from Louisiana,” says Owen. “It means fine and splendid. Words are fun, aren’t they?”

One of Jim’s fondest memories is of Col entering a red grevillea in the local show’s flower competition. “Only the town matrons entered, and only roses and carnations,” says Jim. “I was embarrassed but now when I look back it might have been a bit forward thinking and showed a bit of courage. Col’s his own man and if he can stand up to the town matrons, he can probably pretty much stand up to anybody.”

One of the few times that Jim can remember his dad furious is when a mob of cattle trampled a newly planted plot of trees.

Col Owen, 60, is sitting at a long wooden table in a kitchen so huge that it has an industrial-style fridge.

He and Gesine made their family home out of the town’s old 25-bed hospital, which they bought 21 years ago and moved to their property “Nunyara” just outside Inglewood, a town of 1100 about four hours’ drive west of Brisbane. Once a tobacco-growing area, the region now mainly supports sheep, cattle and grain.

Their home, complete with dozens of peacocks and ducks, is on 1400 acres with another 4500 acres nearby for fattening cattle. The house has soaring ceilings, a grandeur slightly faded, peeling wall paper, and so many rooms that newcomers easily lose their bearings. Owen also imbues it with a sense of ghosts. “I can still see where the beds were and lots of my old friends died in those beds,” he says.

This night we are eating a delicious bean soup, followed by marinated fish and lemon meringue pie. Owen refers to a weight problem as he tucks into the pie. "There are small spoon people and large spoon people. I am a large spoon person," he says.

In between mouthfuls, Col is talking poetry. It sprouts when he's asked why he loves trees so much.

He has planted 12,000 trees and shrubs on the family property, turning once bare farming land into a beautiful oasis. Olives are the latest family venture.

He has also planted out the local hospital and nursing home (which Gesine was instrumental in having built).

"Trees are some of the most beautiful things I know," Owen says. "They stand alone in their solitude and supported splendour and they grow and get on with it. They have a tremendous desire to live. I have enormous respect for trees and what they give us and how little they ask from us." It seems that shrubs are valued mainly for the trees' sake. "They provide a nice understorey for the trees," he says.

Somehow, it seems appropriate that Owen has such an empathy with trees. A big man with a bushies' beard and a tendency not to waste words, he is the quintessential country GP. For all his medicopolitical networking and travelling, he enjoys his solitude. He doesn't feel quite right in cities.

"I like to have space and clean air," Owen says. "If I go to Sydney for a few days, I feel uncomfortable. When I get back here, I feel all right." The Owens go to bed early, rise early and are rarely in idle gear. They are teetotallers, but Owen wasn't always so sober.

Dr Kevin Hourigan, a Brisbane gastroenterologist and friend since the days Owen rode "a ridiculous motor scooter" at university, says his best recollections are unprintable. "He was no shrinking violet," Hourigan recalls. "He could drink and smoke and spit and swear with the best of them."

Owen grew up in north Queensland and then Toowoomba, which is not far from where he has ended up. He was captain of the school and most of the sporting teams, and always wanted to do medicine "because I thought that would be pretty constructive stuff".

His keen participation in sport continued at university, in between socialising. From there he went to Charleville in south-west Queensland as hospital superintendent as part of the terms of his university scholarship.

There he learnt the art and craft of bush surgery, and also broke his industrial teeth, organising a relieving system for local doctors. This was

the 1960s, before rural recessions and droughts, and country life was good, with picnic races, balls and tennis afternoons.

But after three years Owen was glad when the opportunity arose to take up a solo general practice at Inglewood in 1968. The day the Owens arrived in town, there were patients waiting outside the surgery for him.

“I had the view that a one doctor town was probably the ultimate in testing your professionalism as well as your own personal integrity,” says Owen. “This is the biggest challenge you could have, looking after a population and being the only doctor.”

One of the reasons he gave up drinking, apart from wanting to set an example, was so that he was always ready for the calls which come at all hours of the day and night - sometimes to mend animals.

His job has brought insights into all aspects of the human condition.

“There is a lot of courage and heroism in little country towns, the things that women put up with, bringing up children with alcoholic husbands,” he says. “First you fix the battered wife and then the husband who has busted his bone hitting her.”

Owen has delivered many hundreds of the locals. He stopped delivering babies last year because of a policy change affecting the local hospital, and misses the “special bond” it brings. One of “his” babies was born to parents whom he had also delivered.

He also delivered one of his political sounding boards - the local National Party MP and deputy leader of the Queensland Opposition, Lawrence Springborg. (Owen, who describes himself as socially conservative, is a life member of the Nationals. But he hasn't been active in the party since the 1970s, believing it has moved away from its charter of looking after country people to become a right wing party.)

Ask about the most striking memories of his practice, and the news is mostly bad. There was the time a car hit a train, leaving four dead and two critically injured. The time a bus ran into trees, and he arrived to a scene “like a war zone”.

“Afterwards you replay it in your mind - is there anything else I could have done,” he says. “What could I do better next time?”

For a bushie, Owen has little affection for the tools of the bush. “I don't like horses. I don't like guns and I don't like motorbikes,” he says. “They all hurt people.”

Owen has always tried to put his family before work's constant demands, but he's lost count of how many family events he's been called away from.

He has no regrets, but wouldn't recommend the job these days.

“It was right for me at the time,” he says. “I wouldn’t advise anyone else to do it in this day and age. From the family and quality of life point of view, I don’t think it is the way to go.”

His family seems to have endured the demands remarkably well. They take great delight in each other and their home base. Gesine’s mother, who had Alzheimer’s, was cared for here. Col’s mother, who has dementia, also stayed here, before she required 24-hour care and was moved to the local hospital where Owen checks on her during rounds. When Jim married last year, he chose “a very deep thinker” for best man - his father.

“The really big events in my life have been related to my family,” says Owen. “Marrying Gesine (they met at the Royal Brisbane Hospital where she was nursing) was the best thing that ever happened to me. And the children were the next best thing that ever happened to me.”

Katie says the family has drawn closer since her oldest sister, Nicola, died of an asthma attack 14 years ago at age 20. She was a pastry chef and died suddenly at work.

No-one likes speaking about what happened, but Owen points out her grave on the property.

Why, with so much else on his plate, did Owen become so involved in medical politics?

“To get over his midlife crisis,” jokes Gesine.

“What midlife crisis? Simple country doctors don’t have midlife crises,” he replies.

Owen has been clever at exploiting assumptions that might be made about “simple country doctors” as part of his political tactics over the years.

David Weedon, who was on the AMA executive council at the same time Owen was on the RACGP council, says beneath the friendly, affable exterior lies an astute politician and negotiator.

Owen says the real reason he got involved was to make the system better. And he enjoys the politics as well, though his blood has been spilt at times. He describes medicopolitics as an unnatural environment for GPs which “brings out the worst in them”. “He’s not in politics to get out of medicine,” says longstanding Rural Doctors Association colleague and friend, Dr Paul Mara. “He’s in politics because he believes that things can be done better. He gets a great deal of satisfaction out of his medical practice.”

Owen began his political career in the 1970s, agitating on behalf of country medical superintendents. “I had this sense of injustice,” he recalls. “I thought this was no way for doctors to work in the bush and look after people properly.”

He took the Queensland Health Department to the industrial commission, and finally obtained an award which boosted pay and conditions.

“I enjoyed the process,” he says. “I found people listened to what I had to say and followed me.”

From there, he went on to help form the Rural Doctors Association of Queensland in 1989, and was elected founding president. In 1991, he helped organise a rural health conference, at which a national association was formed, with him as first president.

He says they were important years for establishing many structures, including the national rural health alliance, the National Rural Health Research Institute and the rural incentives program.

He sees himself as part crusader, part stirrer. “Unless you stir up the pot you never get there. You have to have broad shoulders and a thick skin.”

A thick skin came in handy during his RACGP presidency, which was marked by bitter division over his plans for a Faculty of Rural Medicine. Owen often did not have the support of his Council, with critics believing he was too focused on rural issues and divided the College.

Dr Bruce Chater, a RDA colleague who was on College Council during Owen’s presidency, says “We were both really saddened by their lack of vision. The saddest part about Col’s presidency was that in the end the rural impasse was the thing that kind of overshadowed everything else.” In 1997, Owen helped form the Australian College of Rural and Remote Medicine (ACRRM).

“The friction of that split still continues,” he says. “I think the College (RACGP) is a great organisation and has enormous potential. I don’t believe it’s really achieved that potential in terms of being relevant to all general practitioners.”

Likewise, some senior RACGP members are critical that ACRRM has not helped general practice present a united front.

Nonetheless, there is widespread respect for Owen and his achievements. Honourable and tough are descriptions often used. None could doubt his commitment to improving the lot of country people.

“He’s deeply passionate about the cause of rural people,” says local MP, Lawrence Springborg. “He’s probably done as much in one lifetime as most people would do in 10.”

“He’s a natural politician,” adds Bill Coote, a former AMA executive now advising Health Minister, Dr Michael Wooldridge. “He knows where to go to get things done, who to talk to.”

As for the other politicians, Owen admires Gough Whitlam and Tim Fischer, but is disappointed by John Howard’s prime ministership after being a longstanding fan. The best health minister he has worked with is Brian Howe. Carmen Lawrence was bright but not passionate about health.

And Dr Wooldridge? “No comment. I have got to work with him,” he says, later adding: “He is by far the cleverest politician we have had in health.”

By now it’s getting late - long past the Owen’s bedtime. One last question - your plans for retirement?

“I have no intention of retiring,” says Owen firmly and not looking particularly pleased the issue has been raised. “I will stay being a country doctor.” He likes it out here, where there is “lots of room to live and breathe.”