

This profile was published in *Australian Doctor* in 1999. This is the unedited copy; minor changes may have been made to the published version.

## **The Profile: Struan Sutherland**

CV Struan Sutherland, 63

- 1999: Retired. Appointed Honorary Senior Associate to Australian Venom Research Unit
- 1994-99: Associate Professor and director, Australian Venom Research Unit, Department of Pharmacology, University of Melbourne
- 1984-1994: Medical Consultant, CSL
- 1985: Doctorate of Science, University of Melbourne
- 1984: James Cook Medal awarded by Royal Society of NSW
- 1980: Doctorate of Medicine, University of Melbourne. Develops antivenom for Sydney funnel web spider bites
- 1979: Appointed WHO consultant on venoms. Publishes article on pressure immobilisation first aid for snake bite
- 1978: FRCPA; FRACP
- 1977: AMA prize for medical research
- 1964-1992: Honorary clinical assistant, Royal Melbourne Hospital
- 1962-1965: Surgeon Lieutenant, RAN, serving on HMAS Voyager and HMAS Melbourne
- 1961: RMO, Royal Melbourne Hospital
- 1960: Graduated MBBS, Melbourne University

## **A GREAT AUSTRALIAN LARRIKEN**

The bow-tie, once his trademark, has gone. These days, it takes enough time and effort just to put on his socks. And Struan Sutherland has no time to waste, especially now that a debilitating disease is interfering with his life's work.

There are still textbooks to write, a short story to finish. Sutherland, 63, who is probably as well known for his spectacular stouthes with former employer CSL as for his pioneering antivenom research, doesn't like to be distracted from his work.

“I like none,” he says affably, when asked how many visitors come to his home of 33 years in Melbourne’s beachside Brighton. Visitors leave him utterly exhausted, he explains. “I have difficulty speaking by the end of the day and, besides, I have said everything I can say of any importance.”

Even swallowing and breathing are becoming difficult, due to Striato Nigral Degeneration, a rare, degenerative brain disease which was diagnosed about three years ago, and is incurable.

Despite the effort which must be involved, Sutherland is a charming, thoughtful host. He brings coffee in a yellow, Australian Doctor mug, and two lamingtons (another of his trademarks) with freshly whipped cream. Later, there is a guided tour of the house, including his oil paintings, and of the prolific camellias and carnations in his beloved garden, which he is no longer able to work in.

An old hand at media interviews, Sutherland is almost apologetic when our conversation falters at one point. “I couldn’t think of a new angle or a snappy quotation for you,” he says.

Sutherland, who lead efforts to develop an antivenom to the Sydney funnel-web spider and revolutionised treatment of snake bite by developing the pressure-immobilisation first aid technique and venom detection kits, seems to have put almost as much effort into spreading the word about his work.

He has been a prolific author of medical textbooks, educational books for the general public, a longstanding columnist for this magazine, and has even written a guide to hydroponic gardening.

He still spends at least four hours a day writing, and is currently working on two books, including a revision of Australian Animal Toxins, which is co-written with longstanding research collaborator Dr James Tibballs. He refuses to abandon his small, electric typewriter for a computer: “I like the feel of paper. I think you can write better.”

It is a glorious spring day outside, but the fire and heater are burning in Sutherland’s spacious study. He feels the cold bitterly because of his illness. “Cheer up,” he smiles when I look glum at the depressing

description of his prognosis. The body may be frail, but his spirit is still sparking.

Sitting nearby is a stack of letters asking doctors to review chapters of the revised Australian Animal Toxins. In typical Sutherland style, these include a multiple choice reply. Recipients can tick either *send me a copy asap*, or, *stuff off*.

You don't have to delve too deeply into the 370-odd pages of Sutherland's autobiography, *A Venomous Life*, to discover his observant, irreverent sense of humour and unwillingness to take persons and positions of authority too seriously.

From the vicar of his childhood, who over-indulged in the communion wine and practised giving the blessing whilst admiring himself in the mirror, to the big-bosomed music teacher who resembled a letter "P" in profile, Sutherland pens a sharp portrait. Dr Michael Wooldridge, when Shadow Health Minister, is described as a "slightly obese but contented fox".

Sutherland is no less tough on himself, describing himself variously as stubborn, headstrong, short tempered and, when a new medical graduate, an "over-confident prig". In the book's acknowledgements, he thanks those who critiqued his first draft and made positive suggestions, including a massive re-write: "Crestfallen, I followed their guidelines but have not regained my former high opinion of my writing skills."

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Kate Blackmore came to know Sutherland well after her husband, Bill Edmonds, died from a tiger snake bite in southern NSW in 1994.

Sutherland was angry that the nearby hospital did not have enough antivenom to treat Edmonds appropriately, and supported Blackmore's push for an inquest. Sutherland, who has never been rolling in cash, paid his own way to Sydney to give evidence to the inquest.

"He was unbelievably generous," recalls Blackmore, now an academic at the University of Tasmania. Like many, she admires Sutherland's sense of humour, social conscience, and capacity to laugh at himself. Like many, she laughs that he would be difficult to live with.

She also says he is modest, which is perhaps surprisingly considering he was once described as having “a certain prima donna quality.” “His whole approach to the inquest was of a very humble person,” says Blackmore. “Despite the fact that he knows more than anybody else in the world about Australia snakes and venom, his whole approach was low key and humble. I think that’s part of the reason why the coroner dismissed everything he said - because he wasn’t pushy and arrogant and all the things he could have been as an expert witness.”

Perhaps the reason that Sutherland has been and continues to be so driven in his work is that he has never lost touch with its clinical implications. People dying of snake and spider bites have never been just interesting case reports to him.

While busy with a demanding research career, Sutherland also took calls at all hours to answer medicos’ queries about patients, and worked part-time for many years in an honorary position at Royal Melbourne Hospital.

What did he enjoy most about his work? “Relations with other doctors, particularly country doctors,” comes the reply. “I have held their hands many times late at night by phone. Occasionally you had to come down a bit heavy on the ones that weren’t doing the right thing. I would say, ‘see you in the Coroner’s Court’ if I thought they were doing the wrong thing.”

The autobiography, (published by Hyland House last year, with half the costs borne by him), reveals his helplessness when patients continued to die while his research into antivenoms was not progressing as smoothly as he wanted. “The obvious question was whether someone else would have had more success,” he wondered after 31-year-old Christine Sturges died following a funnel-web spider bite when making a bed.

He also records his guilt at promoting the view that patients who reached intensive care soon after a funnel-web spider bite had an excellent chance of survival, even without an antivenom. He realised the mistake when patients continued to die.

Sutherland describes autobiography as “an ideal vehicle for self-promotion and subtle shafting of one’s enemies”. A large slab of his is devoted to describing his protracted disputes with CSL management in all their gory detail.

The disputes centred around a clash of personalities and cultures - Sutherland’s passionate commitment to his research versus CSL’s lack of commitment to it at a time of increasing commercialisation.

“Generally when I have got into trouble it is because unnecessary obstructions have been put in the way,” writes Sutherland, who is described by one friend as having a “joyously combative personality”.

Tensions emerged in the late 1970s when CSL management threatened Sutherland with legal action. According to his autobiography, this happened after he complained about its advertisements appearing in the midst of articles he had written for a medical journal. Open warfare broke out in 1980 when Sutherland, told he was to lose most of his staff, was temporarily suspended after calling CSL's then director, Dr Neville McCarthy, "a swine". He was suspended again the following year after throwing paper clips at another manager announcing further funding cuts to his projects. These and subsequent disputes with CSL management were widely reported in the media, often to CSL's detriment.

In 1994, Professor James Angus invited Sutherland to establish the Australian Venom Research Unit in the pharmacology department at Melbourne University. Angus wonders “what might have been” if Sutherland had not had to expend so much angst defending his work at CSL.

“He was a man terribly, terribly committed to his work... a very interesting man who doesn’t suffer fools gladly at all,” says Angus. “He’s not interested in the fluff that goes on like titles, he wants to get on with the problem at hand. He’s an extraordinary person who’s made a wonderful contribution. If some of his behaviour has been over the top, that’s part of the man’s character.”

John Hayman, a Melbourne pathologist who has known Sutherland for 30 years, adds, somewhat understatedly: “He’s not the sort of person who is unduly courteous of people in authority.”

Sydney intensive care specialist Malcolm Fisher, who worked with Sutherland on the funnel web-spider antivenom project, says their relationship began as antagonists but that they then struck up a friendship over lunch. "Associations I've had with Struan Sutherland have led me to wind up using more F's per sentence than almost anyone else," says Fisher, not exactly known as a blushing violet himself. "Struan has the respect of his medical colleagues, but probably is not loved by administrators."

These days, CSL prefers to make light of its former differences with Sutherland. Managing director Dr Brian McNamee praises his research contribution and says any previous strains were minor. "We wish him well, how's his health?" he asks.

However, many of Sutherland's supporters believe the dispute with CSL has contributed to him not receiving due public recognition. James Tibballs says attempts to nominate Sutherland for an award in the Order of Australia have been unsuccessful.

But medical accolades are flowing for "one of the great Australian doctors" - which is how John Pearn, professor of paediatrics and child health at Queensland University, describes his old friend and colleague. Sutherland was recently awarded the Australasian College of Tropical Medicine medal, and the Royal College of Pathologists of Australasia will soon give him its distinguished fellow's award, only the second time this has been given.

When Sutherland learnt of this honour, he joked to colleagues that he was being put up for the extinguished fellow's award.

Despite his achievements, Sutherland is far from triumphant. He puts as much emphasis on what remains to be done in antivenom research as on what has been done. "Many questions remain unanswered and there are interesting challenges awaiting the researcher," he says. "My group had a good run for a few years but to my mind did not completely solve any significant issue."

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Sutherland's autobiography, which covers his family's history, childhood in Bendigo, part-time jobs while a medical student, and four years as a Navy doctor, could equally have been titled *A Tumultuous Life*.

One of the most tumultuous aspects is scarcely mentioned - his troubled marital history. It's probably a fair guess that Sutherland's three marriages (and wives) suffered from his single minded devotion to work. Sutherland, who now lives alone, is still reluctant to discuss his marriages, but says: "Germaine Greer came out with a great statement a few months ago - a man deserves only one wife. It's very true."

After his first marriage ended, Sutherland had prime responsibility for bringing up two children, John and Susie, whose teenage years coincided with his CSL crisis (and who have each since co-authored a book with him).

Susie Kennewell, 34, a former journalist, says she didn't realise how demanding life must have been for her father until she had two children herself and read his autobiography. He coped "in a way only he could do", she says. With lots of lists, and freezing their school sandwiches weeks in advance. She remembers that he drew up a shopping list which showed which foods were found in which aisle - and went to complain when the supermarket changed everything around.

An enthusiastic cook whose trifles are legendary, Sutherland went to great lengths for special family events, compiling menus which included details such as what music would be playing and which produce came from the garden. He also enjoyed the odd practical joke on his children. "It wasn't a boring childhood, put it that way," laughs Kennewell.

Her brother, John Sutherland, 36, a solicitor, remembers his father naming the family car after a kind bank manager. He also remembers the inventions. The method for freezing breakfast sausages so they would fall straight into the pan without having to be separated. The pulley in the kitchen which let them pull down the outside blind from inside the house. And other devices which weren't quite so successful. "He doesn't fit the mould particularly easily, he's never been an establishment person," says John.

Kate Blackmore is not the only one with stories of Sutherland's kindness. Amongst other things, his neighbours mention the annual street

Christmas party which he has helped organise for years. No wonder they also describe him as an eccentric - he once provided the entertainment in a pink tutu and football boots.

While his style could be autocratic and dogmatic, former staff also describe Sutherland as loyal and caring, “a fatherly figure” who was interested in their personal lives. When his own personal life became somewhat lonely, he launched into voluntary work with Pentridge Prison inmates. This gave some of them an interest in science - and Sutherland yet more entertaining anecdotes.

Despite his interest in people, Sutherland has also always enjoyed his own company. His children live nearby, but know to carefully ration their visits so as not to distract him from work.

Sutherland is blunt when describing his future. I am not the first journalist told that this may be “my last interview”, and that he has already written his obituary.

But clearly Sutherland is not one to give in without a fight. “He hasn’t got time to lie down and die,” says daughter Susie. “He’s too busy, he’s got too many things to do.”

Post script: Struan Sutherland died on 11 January 2002. An obituary by Melissa was published in the *British Medical Journal* (available at [www.bmj.com](http://www.bmj.com))