

This is the unedited version of a profile which appeared in *Australian Doctor* in 2000. The published version may have had minor changes.

The Profile: Professor Priscilla Kincaid-Smith, A.C. C.B.E.

CV

Currently: Director of Nephrology, Epworth Hospital; Professor Emeritus, Department of Pathology, Melbourne University
1975-1991: Professor of Medicine, University of Melbourne
1967-1991: Director of Nephrology, Royal Melbourne Hospital
1994-1995: President, World Medical Association
1992-1994: President, International Society for the Study of Hypertension in Pregnancy
1990-1995: Chairman, Federal Council, AMA
1989-1996: Chairman, Board of Directors, Australian Medical Publishing Company
1986-1988: President, Royal Australasian College of Physicians
1972-1975: President, International Society of Nephrology
1970-1972: President, Australasian Society of Nephrology

A REMARKABLE WOMAN

To see Priscilla Kincaid-Smith with her cows is really something special, her friends say. Those of us who've not had the privilege of watching the farmer at her work can only imagine the scene.

That long figure is in dirty work clothes and astride a motorbike or perhaps her horse, admiring the glorious views from the green heights of the family farm at Apollo Bay on Victoria's rugged south coast.

She lifts slightly in her seat before letting out a long bellow. Kincaid-Smith is calling to the mob of Red Angus which she and her husband, fellow farmer and renal physician Dr Kenneth Fairley, have nurtured over many years.

"She has a very personal relationship with her cows," says colleague Gavin Becker, who took over as director of nephrology at The Royal Melbourne Hospital when Kincaid-Smith retired in 1991.

“To see Priscilla on top of the mountain mooing to her cows is one of life’s surprises.”

But it’s not really such a huge surprise to those who know this most indomitable figure of Australian medicine. When Kincaid-Smith sets out to do something, she does it with huge determination, energy and enthusiasm. And, if necessary, some disregard for convention.

“You name it, she’s done it,” comments longtime friend and colleague, Judith Whitworth. Now the director of the John Curtin School of Medical Research in Canberra, Whitworth is one of many eminent physicians who have been taught by or worked with Kincaid-Smith.

“I remember once someone in the media saying she looks good, she sounds good and she’s got a mind like a steel trap,” continues Whitworth. “And she matches that with personal charm. She’s one of the outstanding figures, not just in Australian medicine but international medicine, of her generation.”

Indeed, Kincaid-Smith, 73, has achieved so much in so many fields - from medical research and clinical practice to policy making and medicopolitics - that it can come as somewhat of a surprise to other generations to learn the magnitude of the obstacles she faced.

Just as it can be surprising to hear the professor, who seems rather proper and formal to the casual observer, described by some friends and family members as an eccentric.

A member of the Communist Party in her university activist days but now a Liberal supporter, Kincaid-Smith has been a persistent trail blazer for women. She has been the first woman to hold many positions and has also been a strong advocate for women’s health issues, including availability of safe abortion - but would be uncomfortable describing herself as a feminist.

“The only failure I know of in her career is her attempt to bring proper birth control to the whole world,” says Becker.

Kincaid-Smith traces her love of open spaces and mountain views back to her South African childhood, where she loved bush camping and sport. Indeed, she was so keen on the latter (making the Olympic swimming training squad) that she only just scraped through the academic side of school.

She planned to study physical education at university, but at 16 was considered too young for that course and instead enrolled in a science degree. "I suddenly discovered I was quite good at things, and came top in most of the subjects," she recalls.

When she began a medical degree, her parents - father a dentist and mother a botanist - were not impressed. They had become Christian Scientists when Kincaid-Smith had survived a bout of meningitis as a young child.

But Kincaid-Smith was hooked. She graduated in the early 1950s when new drugs were transforming medicine's ability to cure previously fatal diseases. After a few years working in a hospital near Soweto, she moved to London to train in clinical pathology. But she missed working with patients, so then went back to train in cardiology.

"Then I came into another area of the therapeutics revolution - where suddenly you could treat high blood pressure."

In 1958, as a registrar at the prestigious Hammersmith Hospital, Kincaid-Smith was at work in the postmortem room. An Australian doctor, Dr Kenneth Fairley, was standing on the other side of the body.

"I thought, what a lovely girl," he remembers. Within a month they were engaged and a few months later they set off on their honeymoon, travelling around Europe in an old van and camping on beaches.

Later that year, the newly weds moved to Melbourne - and to the most miserable time of Kincaid-Smith's life.

"I was initially quite keen (about the move to Australia)," she recalls. "I assumed it was a developed country where women were treated equally. But they certainly weren't. I got a terrible shock when I came here. I'd just come from one of the top jobs in London to a place where

no one wanted to have a bar of me and employ me because I was a married woman.

“What made me most angry was the way everyone I spoke to thought it was totally justified. You can’t have women taking men’s jobs, that was the sort of attitude.”

Apart from foregoing full-time work, Kincaid-Smith gave up golf after discovering that women weren’t allowed on the greens on Saturdays. “It was almost worse than not being able to work,” she half-jokes. “I never played golf after that.”

In the midst of the professional struggles, the couple also had to face the loss of stillborn twins. They visited Papua New Guinea after successfully applying for jobs in separate names but returned to Melbourne after discovering that the same restrictions applied there to the employment of married women.

In 1960, the twins Kit and Stephen were born, followed by Jackie in 1963. In 1967, finally allowed to join the workforce proper, Kincaid-Smith took up appointments at Melbourne University and the Royal Melbourne Hospital.

But the criticism continued - at dinner parties and other social functions. Even her mother accused Kincaid-Smith of neglecting the children. In fact, two women were employed to help run the household, so that time could be spent on children rather than chores. Jackie still remembers her mother’s skill at making baboon and lion noises, during their games in the “African jungle”.

Similar attitudes prevailed at work. There are many anecdotes, mostly told by others, which illustrate the discrimination Kincaid-Smith faced.

There was the time she was asked to address a specialist society at one of Melbourne’s private clubs, but was told on arrival to enter by the side door. The time she was publicly presented with a banana and two oranges at a formal conference dinner, with the inference being “here you go Priscilla, this is all that you lack”.

The time she attended a World Medical Association meeting as Australia’s representative but was not allowed to talk because the

chairman assumed she was secretarial staff (this incident helped persuade her to stand as president of that organisation).

“She was professionally very much alone in a man’s world,” says Kincaid-Smith’s daughter Jackie, a senior executive with the pharmaceutical company FH Faulding and Co.

“She was the first female professor at Melbourne University, and she was the first woman president of the International Society of Nephrology and the World Medical Association. I suppose a lot of men were threatened by that.”

Kincaid-Smith says there was great opposition to her professorial appointment in 1975. “I was wrong in all sorts of ways. I was a woman, I had young children, I was an outsider...perhaps I was a bit too pushy.”

Tim Mathew, now director of the renal unit at Adelaide’s Queen Elizabeth Hospital, was Kincaid Smith’s deputy in the 70s. He believes that much criticism of her back then was because the establishment couldn’t handle a woman achieving such success.

Especially such a determined, persistent woman with such strong views.

“She had a strong ability to make correct clinical judgments,” Mathew says. “She’d say something that might appear outlandish but it would prove to be true. She was usually five years in front of the rest of the nephrology world - that was one of her features which irritated some but made her such an influential figure.”

Gavin Becker adds: “Twenty years ago, Priscilla was seen with a great deal of resentment. Nobody likes somebody to be that good. Now I think there’d be very few people who would not hold her in enormous respect. That resentment has long gone. She’s done too much for too many people for too long.”

Other colleagues recall that Kincaid-Smith was criticised as unscientific because she relied heavily on clinical observation. “If she really felt something and observed that it was true and she thought it worked, then she was prepared to say so. It was that enthusiasm that led to a good deal of the scientific skepticism, and the attempts to undermine her status,” recalls one colleague.

“And to produce at the rate she did and to have done all the things she did, it would be very surprising if all of them had the depth of scientific rigour that the absolute scientists would like to have.”

Jim Lawrence, a Sydney academic who worked closely with Kincaid-Smith in local and international nephrology societies, says the battles that she faced “put some of the steel in her soul that was necessary”.

Sir Gus Nossal, a longstanding friend and colleague, uses similar terminology, describing her as “a person who, when the going gets tough, demonstrates nerves of steel. She believe in her principles.”

It is the early 1970s, a time when international medical conferences were still quite a novelty. Florence is hosting such a meeting, and the opening ceremony is packed with local luminaries.

The president of the International Nephrology Society rises to speak, a translator on stage at the ready. Some members of the audience are soon in tears, deeply moved that this Australian is speaking in Italian.

Kincaid-Smith had spent months before the conference, perfecting her talk. Tapes went back and forth to a friend in Italy until her accent was just right.

Gavin Becker was in the audience, watching his boss’s performance in awe. He has never forgotten it, as a mark of her drive for excellence. He describes Kincaid-Smith as an eccentric “because she is so far outside the general mould”.

“There is no line that anybody can draw in the sand that she won’t feel she should go over,” he says.

Ask colleagues to nominate Kincaid-Smith’s greatest achievements and they generally reply that there are too many to single out just one. Ken Fairley says her greatest talent is “good organisation” and an uncanny sense for knowing which bit of research to follow and which bit to throw away.

Whitworth nominates her contribution to understanding of the correlation between clinical findings and renal pathology, her early promotion of aggressive treatment of hypertension, and pioneering work in renal dialysis and transplantation.

But Kincaid-Smith is probably best known for her description of analgesic nephropathy and subsequent work with governments to stop the harm being done by analgesics such as Bex and Vincent's powders.

"She took it from go to wo - from recognising an epidemic, to defining the nature of disease, to experimental studies looking at how and why the analgesics were doing damage, and then playing a role in the policy changes," says Whitworth.

To these achievements, Sir Gus Nossal adds her role in ensuring that renal dialysis remained in the public system and did not become "an entrepreneurial breeding ground."

"Above all, she's always been a doctor," says Whitworth. "She loves looking after patients..and she really cares about what happens to each individual patient she looks after."

Ask Kincaid-Smith her greatest achievement, however, and she replies: "I am most proud of my family." She is close to her children and eight grandchildren (both sons became doctors despite the difficulties that dyslexia caused their early schooling).

She struggles for an answer when asked about hobbies, not having had much time for such things, although she does enjoy gardening and reading thrillers, and is a great animal lover.

Ken Fairley adds that she doesn't have many close friends, preferring to devote herself to family and work. And the 1,000-acre farm - which is no hobby.

For many years, Kincaid-Smith and her husband have made the two hour drive (closer to two-and-a-half for other mortals) to the farm every Friday night, rising early each day to fence, drive tractors, tend to the beloved cattle.

Their offspring remember childhood weekends at the farm with great fondness and, now that they are parents themselves, some horror. There were no rules at the farm. From an early age, they drove bulldozers, cars, motorbikes, risked life and limb.

“We were always allowed to take risks,” remembers Kit Fairley, 39, an infectious diseases physician and epidemiologist at Monash University. “We weren’t sheltered from the possibility that we might hurt ourselves. Fortunately, we came out of that unscathed.”

In 1991, Kincaid-Smith reluctantly retired from her positions at Melbourne University and the Royal Melbourne. She found the transition to retirement very difficult, feeling “unwanted and unloved”, which probably explains why she has never really stopped working.

She arrives at her rooms just down the road from Epworth Hospital (and just over the corridor from her husband’s) at 6.15 each morning to catch up on reading before the patients start to arrive.

At one of the many functions held in honour of her retirement, she told a joke about a prominent senator who pulled into a petrol station. His wife recognised the attendant and told her husband that she used to go out with him.

“Aren’t you lucky you met me?” replied the husband. “Otherwise you’d be the wife of a petrol attendant.”

“Had I married him, he would have been a senator, and you would have been pumping petrol,” the wife replied smartly.

Kit Fairley retells his mother’s joke to make the point that his father has had a crucial role in her success, encouraging her to go back to work despite the obstacles.

“My father’s views on the partnership and the responsibilities of childcare were, even in today’s terms, 20 years ahead of their time,” he says.

Jim Lawrence adds: “She married the one person in the world who could have been a successful partner to Priscilla. Ken was intelligent enough, personally secure enough to live with the enormous strength of her personality.”

Says Gavin Becker: “You probably wouldn’t have had Priscilla if there hadn’t been a Ken.”

Ken Fairley, highly respected by his peers, is the first to admit that he has never shared his wife’s interest in publishing, politics or committees, although they have always worked closely. He is sure she would have been a success regardless of his support.

“But I think I pushed her and kept her in medicine and not let people push her out of medicine and back to the family. She was far too able.”

With her strengths so apparent, how would Kincaid-Smith describe her weaknesses?

“I am a terrible worrier, which is not a good thing to be,” she says.

“When they were younger I worried about my children continuously. Now I worry more about my grand-children. I’ve wasted many hours of potential sleep time worrying about silly things like whether my cows have got enough to eat.”

Despite this anxiety and the shyness which some remark in her, Kincaid-Smith acknowledges that she has been blessed with self-confidence. She believes it may help explain why she became angry rather than depressed when under attack.

“From early childhood I can remember always being sure that I could do anything,” she says in a biographical video released by Film Australia last year.

“It stands one in good stead on occasions where the world seems to be battering you.”