

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: John Murtagh

CV

John Murtagh MBBS (Monash) MD (Monash) BSc (Melbourne) BEd (Melbourne) DipObstRCOG (London)

2000 - Executive Director, Education, RACGP

1995: Member of Order of Australia (for services to medicine, especially in education, research and publishing)

1993 -2000: Professor of General Practice, Monash University

1986 -1995: Medical editor, Australian Family Physician

1970 -79: General Practitioner, Neerim South

THE TEST OF A TEACHER

Is John Murtagh Australia's best known GP? His name may not be as familiar as others to the general public, but there is little doubt that he is famous amongst his peers.

And not just in Australia. At a medical conference in Malaysia last year, one of the organisers went searching for his star speaker, to discover him almost crushed into a corner by the crowd of doctors seeking an autograph.

In the funny way that fate works, some months after that incident, a journalist called Julie Tullberg took her young daughter for a check up at a general practice in Brisbane.

"It's good to see that you're using Dad's book," she told the doctor, noticing one of her father's many best-selling titles on the office shelves.

The GP was stunned. "I just flew to Malaysia to hear him speak," he said. "I got an autographed book from him."

The story still makes Julie chuckle; she admits to quietly enjoying the reaction that often follows when she casually drops her father's name in medical company.

There cannot be many general practices in Australia which do not stock at least one Murtagh title; whether the textbook, *General Practice* (which has sold more than 13,000 copies and is available in nine languages); *Patient Education*; or his collection of case studies, *Cautionary Tales*.

No wonder he is so popular with his publishers, McGraw Hill, who describe his books as their best-selling and “flagship” titles. “He’s one of our favourite authors,” says the company’s Lucy Jacka. “Not just because his books sell, he’s just a lovely man, he’s very unassuming.”

Not that Murtagh can find a copy of *Cautionary Tales* on the windy Friday afternoon that I visit his modest office in the grounds of Monash Medical Centre’s East Bentleigh campus. Muttering that there were three copies here not long ago, he repeatedly returns to his cupboards to rummage, fruitlessly. The book is such a hit it has a habit of disappearing.

It is the only time during our long conversation that Murtagh, 63, exudes anything other than calm. For the most part, he sits way back in his chair, speaking quietly of everything from a murder investigation to why he is making a challenging career change at an age many might be considering retirement, to his worries about modern society.

“My concern today is for the young people and the moral standards that are promulgated through the cinemas and entertainment, and the drug scene and the emphasis on the pursuit of affluence,” he says. “It is very hard for our children not to be affected by this. We lack good role models.”

A few weeks after our interview, Murtagh left his position as Professor of General Practice at Monash University to become national director of the RACGP training program, which has an annual budget of about \$22.5 million and is responsible for 400 new training places each year.

Many will be watching closely to see whether this former country doctor who says medicopolitics give him the “irritants” is able to bring harmony to the program, described by one observer as the “battlefield” between the College’s rural and urban factions.

“I think he’s crazy,” said one colleague of the move. “He’s going into the most politically hot potato job in the country.”

A GP who could turn his hand to just about anything, Bill Tonkin was known as a chap of some distinction around Coleraine, a rich sheep growing area in Victoria’s western district. That was back in the 50s and 60s, long before the area became known as “Malcolm Fraser territory”.

After a hard day, he delighted in spending his evenings around the fire, discussing his more interesting cases at some length with a local who had taken the unusual step - unusual in country towns at that time - of studying medicine.

John Murtagh, who was just eight when Tonkin diagnosed the polio which kept him in bed for three months, also delighted in these fireside chats. They inspired a sense of vocation, as well as an ear for a good story.

One of Tonkin’s most dramatic stories involved a family well known to the Murtaghs, who were themselves a family of farmers and shopkeepers who had been amongst the area’s earliest European settlers.

Police called Tonkin to do an autopsy on a woman who had been found dead in bed after a big day at the races. Her husband, who had been overheard arguing with her the previous evening, was charged with homicide.

The charges were dropped after Tonkin reported that the death was due to self-induced asphyxia, following heavy drinking. The incident caused quite a stir in the small community.

Murtagh has taken after his early mentor in more than one respect. He also loves to spin a good yarn, and to share his clinical experiences. Even to a non-doctor, *Cautionary Tales* is a great read because it reveals its author as a keen observer, not just of the individual patient, but of the human condition, with all its sorrow, joy, and humour.

He is also frank in acknowledging his own mistakes, and shows a sympathetic understanding of the patient's perspective and needs. Perhaps this is because Murtagh spent so long as a patient himself at an early age, followed by many years with severe back pain.

He describes in the book how a neurologist told him to learn to live with the pain and that it would probably get worse as he got older. Luckily, he finally met a sports physiotherapist who fixed the problem with spinal manipulation.

It is perhaps not coincidental that Murtagh, who always liked using his hands, even as a boy in Scouts, first became well known amongst his peers for promoting spinal manipulation in the 1970s. He persevered, despite opposition from within and outside the profession, and has since taught the techniques to many other GPs.

Indeed, Murtagh is now almost as famous for his teaching skills as for his books. Former students praise his ability to convey practical, relevant information simply and meaningfully - an approach which also marked his time as medical editor of *Australian Family Physician*.

"He has a commitment which I've rarely seen amongst medical educators to each student as an individual and as a person," says Professor Leon Piterman, head of Monash's department of community medicine and general practice. "He knows them all by name and remembers them for years after."

"A lot of people, including myself, have modelled our teaching styles on his," adds Michael Kidd, professor of general practice at the University of Sydney, and a former general practice academic registrar at Monash.

Steve Trumble remembers meeting Murtagh on his first day as a medical student at Monash. "He was what we needed to see, he was a true doctor," says Trumble, now the Victorian director of the RACGP training program. "He came across as being so accessible and human. A lot of the specialists will promote themselves as being some sort of demi-god. John came across as a genuine GP, someone we could be like."

He adds that Murtagh has been the most regularly requested speaker for Monash's medical student graduation dinners.

At high school, Murtagh became fascinated by mathematics and decided to become a maths teacher. However, his plans were thwarted at Melbourne University where he was forced to major in biomedical sciences rather than maths.

After three years' teaching science, he felt a "calling" to become a doctor, and applied to join the first intake of Monash University's new medical course. Of the 130 students who began the course, 29 finished.

Colleagues remember that Murtagh stood out because he had the confidence of a mature age student, which did not always endear him to lecturers. Professor Avni Sali, now the head of the graduate school of integrative medicine at Swinburne University, says his dear friend enjoyed teasing a particular professor.

When this professor asked the students why it was important to determine whether a patient with reflux oesophagitis had ear ache, Murtagh replied facetiously: "Could it be, Professor, that the patient had been standing on her head and the acid trickled down the oesophagus into her ear?"

"John irritated that professor a few times," laughs Sali. As his books make clear - often referring to specialists' "tunnel vision" - Murtagh has a far greater respect for the world of the generalist than the specialist.

At medical school, Murtagh started to see Jill Rosenblatt, who was studying medicine at the University of Melbourne. The daughter of a Lutheran minister, she shared his strong religious convictions, and their friendship developed over discussions about medicine.

"He had the strong teacher role which was often very helpful with me," Rosenblatt remembers. She adds, laughing: "I think it's just the way he breathes, he breathes the teacher role."

After marrying, the pair moved to Neerim South, a town of 350 in a dairying, tourist and forestry region in West Gippsland, about two hours' drive from Melbourne, where they shared a practice for nearly 10 years, and attended the 12-bed hospital.

“I’d describe it as the most beautiful area in Australia,” says Murtagh. The scenery is magnificent. We immediately felt a very strong attachment to it.”

The only GPs in town, the couple aimed to offer a complete service. With Murtagh’s skills in surgery and Rosenblatt’s in anaesthetics, they coped with most emergencies and surgical and obstetric cases.

Rosenblatt, who now works at a big group practice in inner Melbourne, still speaks of her husband’s surgical talents with admiration. “He always worked from first principles. We’d have a lot of problems in the country that you wouldn’t see in textbooks and you’d be seeing for the first time. He’d be working through very difficult, deep lacerations, people haemorrhaging to death, he just knew which step to take.”

Murtagh, a practising Catholic who regularly attends a prayer group with his wife, says a strong religious faith underpinned their country practice and their work since.

“We were not prepared to do what patients wanted all the time,” he says. “We didn’t prescribe many drugs. We didn’t do any operations that we thought were unnecessary, such as circumcisions and tonsillectomies, unless there was a good indication. We didn’t do abortions or euthanasia.”

Instead, they introduced the community to the concept of health promotion. They ran talks on depression, first aid, and how to recognise suicidal behaviour, and developed a support system for disadvantaged families.

In his scarce free time, Murtagh enjoyed writing plays for local production. One night, there was much hilarity at a performance of “The Operating Theatre”, a satire on local characters, with himself starring as the surgical “butcher”.

On the way home, a young man was killed in a car accident. “The people who were having fun a couple of hours earlier were suddenly grieving relatives,” says Murtagh.

After years of around-the-clock service, Murtagh, who describes himself as a sensitive person who doesn't cut off easily from others' misfortune, was ready for a change when approached about a job at Monash.

Neil Carson, who was then professor of community medicine at Monash, says one of the reasons he recruited Murtagh was that he was looking for a workaholic. "That's the sort of person I used to go for when I headed the Department because you get your money's worth," Carson laughs. "You don't go for talkers."

Murtagh's capacity for work, at all hours of the day or night, is widely remarked. "At the end of an evening function, if something has to be done, he can do it," comments Jill Rosenblatt. "To me, he is an intriguing non type A, achieving an awful lot. He's not one of those frantic drama queens. It just gets done."

Avni Sali describes his friend as "very loyal, morally 100 per cent correct, very idealistic, and a person who gives up so much of his time to help in any way at all. John is a very caring person, and he cares a lot about people as patients and he cares a lot about his colleagues.

"He is not a person who's worrying about how much he might be paid. For one of the world's leaders in general practice, John lives in a very humble way - he drives an average car and his house is very average as well."

Asked for her husband's weaknesses, Rosenblatt just laughs: "Is football a weakness or a passion..."

Murtagh's small, slightly hunched build is deceptive; inside lurks a sports nut. A keen footballer and tennis player in his youth, he is better known these days as an armchair fan and Hawthorn supporter.

Of the five children (ranging in age from 15 to 32), Julie Tullberg, 31, says she is most like her father. She shares his loves of writing, teaching, and sport.

The father/daughter team has previously co-authored an article for this magazine, describing how they jointly trained marathon swimmer Tammy van Wisse several years ago.

When Tullberg was covering football for The Australian newspaper, her father often accompanied her to games. “I’ve just learnt a lot from my dad from listening to him talking about the footy over the years,” she says. “Dad was always so passionate about sport. I was in six sports teams at school.”

It might be said that a good grounding in the tactics and crunch of football could come in handy at the RACGP, but Murtagh is not known as a political player. Some believe this may prove an advantage in helping to unite warring factions, while others dismiss such hopes as naive.

Murtagh is not noted for being a keen administrator or information technology enthusiast. But many hope that his high personal standing and background in academe and rural practice will stand him good stead in what Steve Trumble describes as “one of the most difficult jobs in general practice education.”

“John is a brilliant educationalist and will be able to tread that fine line between educational quality and workforce imperatives,” says Trumble. “Because he is so well regarded in general practice, I hope people will listen to what he has got to say.”

Neil Carson, now an advisor to the College, adds: “I think he will bring a breath of fresh air to training at the College. I believe it is needed. A lot of the teaching and direction of the training program in the past has been in my view a bit light weight and not reflecting the needs of the young doctors entering general practice.”

Dr Vicki Kotsirilos, a former student of Murtagh and a past president of the Australian Integrative Medicine Association, says his appointment is one of the “best things that could happen to the RACGP”, partly because of his openness to “all forms of ethical, natural healing.”

Murtagh says his priorities include working towards unity and to providing future GPs with the skills to tackle generalist work with

confidence: “One of my educational thrusts in life has been to encourage GPs to do more.”

Murtagh argues that the demise of the generalist practitioner has discouraged continuity of care and cost effective care, while contributing to disillusionment and a crisis of confidence amongst GPs.

“General practitioners have been discouraged from taking up certain areas of practice, either from medicolegal scares or because they have been brain washed in medical school by specialists and subsequently stay clear of certain areas which they could do.”

By now, we are enjoying a quiet cup of tea and a lemon slice, and evening is falling outside. So what does he *really* (in italics) think about his new job?

“You have to just be yourself and try to be civil and keep your eye on the ball and look at the big picture and not be distracted by trivia and humbug,” he says. “If it doesn’t work, well, too bad, I can retire.”

Somehow, though, you suspect that even retirement won’t keep John Murtagh from his work. His wife certainly doesn’t expect so. And Murtagh? Well, apart from wanting to work on his fitness, he wouldn’t mind doing some work for charitable organisations...