

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 Pearn

CV

Current

Professor of Paediatrics and Child Health, University of Queensland
Paediatrician, Royal Children's Hospital, Brisbane
Surgeon General, Australian Defence Forces

2000: The Ramsay Medal, awarded by the Royal Society of Medicine, London

1994: Father of the Year Award, Qld

1990-1999: National Director of Training, St John Ambulance

1979: Member, The Order of Australia

1974: PhD in neurology and genetics, University of London

1970: MD in embryology, toxicology and experimental pathology, University of Queensland

1964: MB BS, University of Queensland

A QUIRK OF HISTORY

When medical history buffs descended on Norfolk Island for a conference several years ago, they were greeted effusively by one of the conference organisers, clad in full period costume.

In between presenting papers and organising the program, he played the piano and conducted the orchestra at conference functions, all the time swapping one fancy dress outfit for another.

Delegates who hadn't previously encountered John Hemsley Pearn began to mutter, *what is that doctor going to do next?*

Undoubtedly, it's a question often asked in the wake of the Pearn whirlwind. Professor of paediatrics and child health at the University of Queensland since 1986, Pearn is widely known as a man of many hats, diverse interests and unquenchable energy.

His other major appointments are with the Australian Defence Forces - after 36 years with the Army Reserve, he was appointed to the top

medical job, as Surgeon General, in 1998. He has also worked for many years with St John Ambulance, including as national director of training.

But Pearn is just as well known for his more esoteric interests, as an enthusiastic scholar of medical history and botany, as a collector (some would say hoarder) of fossils, stamps and coins, and as a prolific writer and orator on all of these subjects - and more.

Indeed, a quick scan of his CV, which fills three bound volumes, reveals that he has published on everything from child accident prevention to envenomation, prenatal cytogenetic diagnosis, the history of Queensland's sugar industry and the symbols of the goddess of health on coins and medals.

Small wonder that so many describe Pearn as a renaissance man. The next most common observations are that his memory must be photographic, and that he crams so much into his days, he cannot need much sleep.

Not that Pearn gives the impression of a man in a rush during our lengthy interview. When I arrive late to his offices at the Royal Children's Hospital in Brisbane, he is graciousness itself. Makes us a cuppa, introduces colleagues, and explains the stories behind the historical photographs on the walls.

The same charm is evident whenever the phone rings, whether he is speaking to staff, patients or medical colleagues. "That's lovely," he repeats many times, in well rounded tones. "Very warmest wishes, lovely to hear your voice."

Midway through describing his career, Pearn interrupts himself to admire my ring. "It's lovely," he says. "Let me give you a little card."

He rummages amongst the drawers of his crowded desk. "This is some 12th century fun," he laughs, signing and dating it. The card bears an historic prescription involving "perles, saphyre, and thin peeces of gold and sylver".

Making stationery is another interest, and by interview's end, I have acquired several more cards, including one detailing his surname's

origins - it is an old Cornish name meaning the place where thornbushes grow.

I am not the first to think that there is something very old worldly about John Pearn - and not just because he is more comfortable with the dictaphone than email.

Phil Hammond, who came to know him well when covering medicine for The Courier Mail newspaper in Brisbane, recalls that Pearn once grew “porkchop sideburns” to match his outfit at a medical historical meeting.

“He just looked like the old colonial gentleman. His heart is in that era. He’s certainly got the manners of that era,” says Hammond.

Medical historian Sister Catherine O’Carrigan agrees: “He’s got that charm that doesn’t belong to the 20th century at all, or the 21st century either.”

“John is one of the most thoughtful and proper people I have ever met. He always does the right thing,” adds an old medical friend and colleague from the University and military, Colonel Vlas Efstathis.

Friends also describe Pearn as a romantic. “One of his favourite short stories is The Happy Prince by Oscar Wilde; he will read his favourite bits out and tears will well up in his eyes,” says Dr Ingrid Tall, a Brisbane GP and former student, who became close friends with Pearn while working as a medical journalist.

Another frequent observation is that Pearn is completely absent of malice and chooses to focus on the good in people and the world. A story is told that Pearn and his wife Vena were camping in freezing temperatures in England in the early years of their marriage, when they had little money. The three young children were in the tent and the couple had to kip in their car.

Pearn turned to his wife and said something like, Aren’t we lucky darling? Isn’t this just perfect? Her response is said to have been somewhat exasperated.

Pearn’s generosity is also legendary. “One time I heard someone admired that he had these cufflinks,” says Tall. “And he said, why don’t

you have them?” She adds: “I just hope he doesn’t give away the ones I gave him.”

When Hammond’s teenage son had to do a school project on the Vietnam war, Pearn came to their home to be interviewed at length. “He’ll do anything for anybody,” says Hammond. “He’s got a heart of gold.”

How does this gel with Pearn’s long career in the Army, not known for fostering a rose-coloured view of the world? No doubt he enjoys its traditions of ritual and ceremony.

But he also loves the adventure. He served during confrontation in PNG in the late 60s, in Vietnam in 1970, and then spent a few years jumping out of planes with the Parachute Regiment in the UK. The military also enabled another “wonderful adventure” conducting survival research in the Arctic, which included study of survival caves in ice and packed snow.

More recently, he has served in Rwanda and PNG, post-tsunami.

Underneath the gentility lies a willingness to take a stand and fight for it. In the 70s and 80s, Pearn had his share of stoushes, both within and outside the medical profession, as he pushed for safety legislation for children. He fought for swimming pool fencing, bubble packaging for drugs, and car restraints.

“Some of that was very unpopular,” he remembers.

Above Pearn’s desk is a signed photograph of Dr Benjamin Spock, dated 1986. Pearn never met him, but they corresponded for 20 years. “Spock was one of the greatest individuals of the 20th century,” says Pearn. “He was the great advocate for the dignity and the individuality of children. That’s mainstream stuff now but of course he was pilloried for it. He was regarded as a naive academic radical.”

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Some years ago, during a trip back to his ancestral home on a Greek island, Vlas Efstathis was taking it easy, enjoying the local fare and stunning views. Soon after his old friend arrived for a visit, Efstathis found himself caught up in a new project.

Pearn had recognised yet another opportunity for a book. The ruins near the Efstathis family home were of a fort established 900 years ago by the Knights of St John. Centuries later, the order's work in pioneering first aid was recognised by the ambulance service which took its name.

Efstathis and Pearn pieced together the story of the knights and the island, and the result was "The Knight's Castle on Kastellorizo", released last year.

This story will come as no surprise to those who know Pearn and his compulsion to record history, whether of his dentist father (*Of Heart and Mind: A Biography of James Owen Pearn*), his school experiences (*Willingly to School: A Personal Memoir of Life at a Queensland State Primary School*), paediatric education (*Focus and Innovation*), or the military (*Reflections of Rwanda*). One of his best sellers - although not as popular as his book on first aid - is a history of the Brisbane suburb of Auchenflower, where he grew up. The book traces the suburb's name back to the farm in Scotland it was named after - and which the Pearn have visited.

In all, Pearn and his main collaborator, Peggy Carter, have published 52 books on history and medicine, mainly through a non-profit publishing unit he established in the Faculty of Medicine, called Amphion Press.

Pearn is also a prolific diarist, who loves to document the every day. After social or other functions, he is renowned for sending people framed, signed photos to document each such occasion - as happened recently after he organised friends (who were encouraged to wear togas) to come to a viewing of an old, silent movie of *Ben Hur*.

"You can invite him over for devonshire tea and the journal will come out and everyone will have to sign it," says Ingrid Tall. "You will get a mounted photo commemoration sent to you later on."

Pearn's favourite time is 5am to 7.30am, which is set aside for writing, seven days a week. "I love it," he says. "It's the only time I really feel in control of my life."

Jeanette Covacevich, senior curator (vertebrates) at the Queensland Museum, has known Pearn for 30 years, and collaborated with him on many projects.

“The thing that strikes me about him above all other people that I know is that he not only expends more energy but produces more in more fields than anyone else I’ve ever encountered. And I’ve met quite a few high fliers.

“He’s got a tremendously expansive sort of personality, both in terms of giving and in terms of knowledge.”

Why such drive? Especially when friends talk about how exhausted he gets, and worry about his health. “I regard it almost as a duty,” Pearn answers. “I’ve got the privilege to have the education.”

Pearn describes the book about his father as “a son’s last gift”. It conveys the joy and fondness with which Pearn regards his family and childhood. Between the lines, there are also stories of poverty and hardship. Pearn’s father grew up on a small sugar cane farm in north Queensland, and in his adult years suffered serious health problems which at times left him unable to work.

He was an invalid during his last decade, a legacy of childhood rheumatic fever, and died of a stroke six weeks after Pearn graduated from medicine. He was 60 - the same birthday which Pearn recently celebrated - and some people speculate that his father’s ghost is one of the reasons Pearn drives himself so hard.

Pearn himself says his father, an academic at the University of Queensland in latter years, was his greatest influence who inspired a love of learning.

“I had a terrible fear of failing all the way through,” says Pearn when describing his achievements in his medical and science degrees. He topped his classes, received first class honours, and also excelled at rowing and as a pianist.

After graduation, he spent two years researching embryology, toxicology and experimental pathology at UQ, before undertaking a PhD in neurology and genetics at the University of London, and then settling on a career in paediatrics. This decision, he says, reflected his broad

clinical interests, aspects of his personality (by this he means that he is a “bit naive”), and his delight in the worlds of childhood.

This self-analysis does not surprise Sister Catherine O’Carrigan who, describing why she finds working with Pearn such fun, says: “He maintains the exuberant enthusiasm of a child.”

Not everyone shares Pearn’s enthusiasms. Over the years, they have irritated some colleagues, who do not share his priorities or interests. Some disparage him as a “dabbler”, or a “Biggles” character. “He’s a complex, slightly enigmatic person. I really don’t know what makes him tick,” says one colleague.

Ingrid Tall finds a paradox between the responsible, hard-working Pearn and his “wonderful ability to live in the now and to enjoy the present moment”.

“It is a gift I really admire,” she says. “I asked, how do you do that? He thought it was related to when he was in the military and he was parachuting and he broke his back many years ago, and he said he then realised you have to enjoy the present. Then his wife said, don’t be ridiculous John, you’ve always been like that.”

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When Pearn rings his son Nigel, an actor and theatre worker, during our interview to ask if he would speak to me, the conversation begins, “Nigel darling...speak very frankly dear.”

Asked later about this affectionate display, Nigel laughs that when he was growing up, he was known by neighbourhood friends, thanks to his dad, as “Nigey dear”.

In fact, it sounds as if the family sometimes enjoys a good chuckle at Pearn’s expense, teasing him about his book titles, his tendency to take control of social situations, his gung-ho enthusiasm, and his love of alliteration and other word games.

Nigel, 29, adds that his father also enjoys a good laugh at himself on occasions: “In actual fact, he is much happier laughing at himself than at other people.”

Nigel's memories of childhood are of his father giving lessons about mussels during beach expeditions, of exploring ruins and collecting fossils, of a large fruitcake being divided up amongst his friends as a metaphor for cell division, and of Pearn organising neighbourhood children into an orchestra.

It's probably not surprising that two of the three Pearn children work in drama, given that Nigel describes his father as "theatrical in the 19th century melodrama sense".

"I'm probably the child most like him," he adds. "I love him and he drives me nuts."

Sister Catherine O'Carrigan first came to know John Pearn, "one of the most interesting human beings I've ever met", when she was writing a history of St Vincent's Hospital in Sydney.

"A postage stamp brought me into his circle of acquaintances," she recalls. He had written to ask about the history of certain medical stamps. A friendship was born, and the two went on to organise the first conference on the history of medicine in Australia.

After the conference, at St Vincent's, she was stunned to discover that Pearn had spent the night on the floor of the nurses quarters, rather than waste time with accommodation, because he was working into the night to finalise arrangements.

"I've learnt never to be surprised by anything he does," she adds.