This is the unedited version of a profile which appeared in *Australian Doctor* in 2001 The published version may have had minor changes.

The Profile: Peter Brooks

CV in Brief

2000: RACP medal for outstanding service
1998- Executive Dean, Health Sciences, University of Queensland
1997: Honorary MD, University of Lund, Sweden
1990-95: Honorary Secretary, RACP
1991-1998: Professor of Medicine, University of NSW, St Vincent's Hospital
1983-1991: Florance and Cope Professor of Rheumatology, University of Sydney, Royal North Shore Hospital
1988-89: President, Australian Rheumatology Association
1967: Graduated, Monash University

A GENTLE STEEL

Napkins are flying, coiffures are unravelling, and the stiff breeze is becoming a bit of a bother for those enjoying an otherwise pleasant lunchspot on the banks of the Brisbane River. But Peter Brooks seems quite unperturbed, absorbed in his plate of vegetables and the conversation, which skips across everything from why Madonna is overpaid to his favourite recipes and belief that women generally make better managers.

Not to mention his grand plan to wind back the media's coverage of sport (and replace it with more space for health and science), and, if given ultimate power for a day, to eliminate one of the health bureaucracies. Probably the states'.

Then there's the matter of that annoying letter, in which some surgical colleagues from the University of Queensland accused him of arrogance in the way he has been shaking the place up. "Well," he says drily, "I find it a little interesting that *a surgeon* would find me arrogant."

Brooksey, as he is widely known, certainly has a lot on his plate at the moment. And so does the University of Queensland, where the winds of change have been howling, far too loudly for some.

In 1998, vice chancellor Professor John Hay recruited Brooks to the job of executive dean of health sciences, a job overseeing several hundred employees, about 3,000 students and the schools of medicine, dentistry, physiotherapy, occupational therapy, speech therapy and human movement. The University was in the midst of a major restructuring and also dealing with fallout from the graduate medical program's introduction.

Hay says he was attracted by Brooks' reputation as an outstanding clinician and researcher and "people said he had a most agreeable consultative managerial style yet was perfectly capable of bringing about major change." It was a happy coincidence for Brooks, then professor of medicine at St Vincent's Hospital in Sydney, that he was also ready for a change, having applied for the dean's job at the University of NSW and missed out.

Professor Ken Donald, the fifth head of the UQ medical school in less than a decade, says much of the flak that Brooks has since copped over the restructuring of the faculty overlooks that it was university policy and not Brooks' personal initiative. "In any restructuring there are winners and losers," says Donald. "Across the university, the funding base has been taken from departments and given to schools."

More than a dozen people in the School of Medicine have taken redundancy in the past year, and as with every university these days, there are internal rumblings about cutbacks. "Peter and I wear a lot of heat about the budget," says Donald. "But I have no option but to live within the budget I'm given by government."

In this environment, it is perhaps unsurprising that not everyone is as excited as Brooks about some of his new initiatives, which include a clinical school in Brunei, a planned centre for complementary therapies in a joint venture with Southern Cross University, and a new School of Population Health.

He's also had a hand in establishing a new postgraduate course in health journalism, and is planning a course to train generic health workers for country areas. "We have gone crazy in this country saying we have to have doctors in every country town," he says. "Many small

towns will never support a doctor unless he or she is escaping from his partner or lawyer or is on drugs."

Won't such a course be quite controversial? "Absolutely," he says. "I don't do things unless they are controversial." He adds drily: "I think the AMA will be delighted."

He also plans to foster multidisciplinary learning - "if they learn together they might acutally work together, which would be an extraordinary thing".

And there are plenty more ideas for change, something which will come as no surprise to those who know the diminutive Brooks. He remarks many times during our interview on the profession's conservatism, particularly in Queensland.

"Everybody likes to be liked but you realise you are not going to win too many friends if you are going to change the system," he says. "This is not a job you do if you want friends because whatever decision you make will compromise somebody.

"I call a spade a spade to a certain extent and I'm not reticient to tell people, to point out their deficiencies...I try and do it in a constructive way. I don't like people bullshitting me and there's still a lot of that goes on here."

Mika Hayward, the faculty's administration officer, has been impressed by Brooks' ability to survive in what has at times been a difficult environment: "He's a bit like a surfer; you think he's been destroyed by the big wave and then he pops up again quite quickly, smiling."

At least Brooks has the support of the university administration this time. He was not so lucky when he tried to bring in changes at the University of Sydney, as professor of rheumatology at Royal North Shore Hospital during the 1980s.

Les Schrieber, a rheumatologist who worked closely with Brooks at the RNSH, says he can create antibodies in others because of his reluctance to accept the status quo. "He will often have ideas that people aren't ready to receive, especially in academe, which tends to be conservative," says Schrieber.

“He had some innovations about how things at this university should be and at the time there was considerable uproar about it and yet several years down the track, that’s the direction that’s occurred. He made himself unpopular with the powers that be and, I think, to his detriment - it certainly influenced the career aspirations that he had within this institution.”

Brooks moved to St Vincent’s after his application for the chair of medicine at RNSH was unsuccessful.

Richard Larkins, dean of medicine, dentistry and health sciences at Melbourne University, describes Brooks as “someone who thrives on controversy and isn’t uncomfortable about making himself temporarily unpopular to achieve an ends that he believes in”.

Others use terms like efficient, visionary, unorthodox, determined, even ruthless.

And Brooks himself gives the distinct impression of enjoying the fray. “Yes, I like fights,” he says. “I like winning, but I accept you are not going to do that all the time. I am willing to fight about a principle.”

So it comes as some suprise to learn about the forces which shaped Brooks early in life. “This will be a revelation to a number of my colleagues around here,” he laughs, referring to his upbringing by Quaker parents committed to pacifism and non conflict.

His father, an English academic in modern languages, had refused to fight during World War Two and was instead made to work for his country, becoming a market gardener.

“Within about a month he was running courses for the local farmers on how to grow bigger cabbages, he was that sort of person,” says Brooks.

The family migrated to Tasmania after World War Two, when Brooks was about eight. His father, who died about four years ago, worked in adult education, becoming head of the anti-discrimination board in Tasmania and eventually setting up adult literacy campaigns around the world for the UN.

The Quaker's social values had a profound effect on the family. Two of Brooks' three brothers were drafted to fight in Vietnam but opposed the war so strongly, they refused to claim conscientious objection, and left the country. Neither could come back to the country for a decade, causing much family heart ache. Brooks campaigned actively against the war while a medical student.

One brother now makes political films and the other runs a reafforestation program in India (the third died in an accident in Nepal many years ago). Brooks has a social perspective of medicine - "I get mad at endocrinology colleagues who spend all of their time looking at putting women on oestrogens; why don't they bring back free milk into schools and encourage exercise?" - and is critical of the economic imperatives which seem to rule the world, arguing that shareholders do not necessarily act for the public good.

"That's why I strongly believe there are some things that are too important to be left entirely to market forces and I would put health, education and transport in there," he says.

"We don't have a caring society at the moment. Five, ten, twenty years down the track we will be in deep trouble. If this Government stays in for another term and you continue to decimate the universities, you will decimate the intellectual capital...in the end that breeds revolution."

Brooks doesn't support huge salaries for executives or think that celebrities like Madonna and Pat Rafter deserve mega millions when so many live below the breadline.

"I'm fairly agnostic," he says, "but, if anything, I'd be a Quaker."

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There are two types of people in the world, according to Brooks, who decided he wanted to be a doctor at about age six, after changing his mind about being a policeman.

There are those who say "why?" and those who say "why not?"

"I'm not interested in the whys," he says. "I'm interested in the why notters. I find it difficult to imagine going through life as a pessimist. Life

is so short really on this planet. We are all here to do something...if you don't make a difference your time here is wasted."

Brooks, 56, is notorious amongst staff for pulling a long face on Friday afternoons and trying to encourage them to be sad the working week is over. He believes it is a poor reflection on Australia and its ability to compete internationally that more people aren't at work on weekends.

"They are in Singapore," he says. He is also known for returning to work in the evening after dinner with his family, and for putting in long days straight off an international flight.

"His great weakness is not appreciating that other people like having a life," says broadcaster Dr Norman Swan, a close friend. "I've phoned him on Sunday morning and he's been in the office. I suspect it's not a rarity."

When Professor Ric Day worked with Brooks at St Vincent's, he became used to a regular call from his colleague on Sunday nights, "just to review the week and what we were going to be up to".

"I dont know if I've ever met anyone who works so hard and so consistently on so many fronts," says Day, professor of clinical pharmacology. "He's a human dynamo. He is like a field marshall - he's a tremendous strategist and organised. His ability to get people together and get them enthused and get them working on various research or teaching or professional projects is very great."

Another colleague from St Vincent's, Professor Ron Penny, was also impressed by Brooks' capacity for wide ranging activities: "His name kept popping up everywhere...on a whole range of publications or committee deliberations."

On top of his UQ commitments, Brooks maintains a research interest in rheumatology - some say he is still Australia's best known rheumatologist despite stopping clinical practice a few years ago. "Long before evidence based medicine was the fad it is today, Peter was promoting it," says Swan.

Brooks, who says he has a tendency to take on too many things at once and not necessarily finish them all, is also national coordinator of the

World Health Organisation's Bone and Joint Decade, and was recently appointed by the Federal Government to the Board of General Practice Education and Training.

"There's a little word in the English language that I keep reminding him about that's got two letters," says his wife, Helen Ward. "N-O."

They met when she was his registrar at the Royal Hobart Hospital in 1976. Helen is not practising at present, being mainly involved in medical education and quality assurance. She also does the lion's share of family work.

"Helen's the one who's the saint. She is a highly respected respiratory phsyician and basically," laughs Norman Swan, "puts up with Peter. She's the rock on which his life rests."

Helen believes her husband's work ethic comes from his father."Work is his life," she adds.

Brooks, who sounds as if he regrets not spending more time with his sons David, 13, and Thomas 10, agrees that he takes after his father (he also has a 25-year-old daughter, Libby, a journalist in England, from a previous marriage).

"I'd have to say that one of my weaknesses is that I am a confimed workaholic," he says. "I actually really enjoy work. I think my father was the same. I used to be very proud of what he was doing, but he wasn't the sort of dad who played cricket with us."

Yet Brooks is also known for the effort he puts into maintaining friendships, including many from sociable student days at Monash University.

Michael Hannon, now a Family Court judge in Hobart, has been friends with Brooks since they were at Hobart High School together nearly 50 years ago.

They are both still members of the gourmet club, a group of friends who began meeting more than 30 years ago over fine cooking. Brooks doesn't get to many meetings these days but maintains a passion for

cooking - Helen laments that it is only for dinner parties these days - with zabaglione his specialty.

“His main trait is his capacity to make friends and to maintain friendships by contact wherever he may be,” says Hannon. “Now I get emails from him wherever he is in the world.”

Brooks is a prolific contributor to The Medical Journal of Australia and its editor Dr Martin van der Weyden has also noticed that Brooks is quick on the emails: “Saturday afternoon, Sunday afternoon, he emails. You put a question to Peter, you will have a timely answer one way or the other. Sometimes with others you have to wait for weeks.”

Liberal politician Dr Brendan Nelson also receives the odd email from his old Flinders University lecturer, commenting on his activities. Nelson remembers Brooks for a good sense of humour, being a demanding but fair taskmaster, and for treating everyone with the same degree of respect: “When I look back on my teachers there are two or three who really stand out...and he’s one of them. He had a great influence on me.”

Professor Kerry Goulston, a colleague from Brooks’ RNSH days, says one of his old friend’s main traits is that he’s honest - “and there’s not that many bloody academics you can say that about”. He adds that Brooks is also known for having a remarkable network of contacts with whom he stays in touch.

Perhaps it’s not surprising, considering how often Brooks has moved around: from a stint in Glasgow to the Royal Hobart, to Flinders, to RNSH, to St Vincent’s and now, in what has not been an easy move for his family, to Brisbane.

When Les Schrieber congratulated Brooks on his latest appointment, he added: “What’s the next job?” Schrieber explains: “He’s the sort of guy who would like to be a vice chancellor and has the ability to do that.”

Of the many observations about Peter Brooks, two stand out: one by a professional contact - “he is the sort of person who has got a steel fist with a soft mitten around it” - and the other by his friend Kerry Goulston, who says, “there’s gentleness about him and yet there’s steel underneath”.