

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: John Schwarz

CV in Brief

Director, African AIDS Foundation

1984-present: GP, Camden, NSW

1975-84: medical superintendent, a mission hospital, Natal, South Africa

FAILURE, FATHER, STRONGMAN AND AIDS ACTIVIST

John Schwarz is extremely proud of his five children. But when he rose to give the traditional father-of-the-bride speech at his youngest daughter's wedding some years ago, he created a bit of a stir.

Sarah, a GP, had been a failure, Schwarz told the crowd gathered in the sprawling grounds of the family home. She had flunked kindergarten and, like his other children, had not been a brilliant student.

In fact, they were a family of failures, said Schwarz. He had been kicked out of university on his first attempt at medicine because he was having too much of a good time, enjoying the surf and other athletic pursuits.

"People said to my wife, 'don't marry that bloke, he's too dumb'," Schwarz said.

Now that his audience was on the edge of their seats, wondering what could be next, Schwarz came clean. He didn't actually think there was anything wrong with failing; indeed, it could be a virtue.

"The point is that you can fail so long as you learn from your failures," he said. "It actually makes you a better person than if you had never failed and if it doesn't hold you back from doing worthwhile things."

Schwarz, who passed medicine second time round at 30 and after a few unsatisfying years as a pharmacist, has plenty of achievements under a belt which has recently become way too big (more on that later). His general practice at Camden, on Sydney's south-western fringes, is thriving and in the midst of renovations to accommodate expansion.

But Schwarz, 59, likes to tell patients about his failings, including that he is shy and detests public speaking and paperwork, because he believes it helps instill confidence about their own potential.

He learnt some hard lessons about failure while working in a mission hospital for Zulus in South Africa from 1975 to 1984. He went there because of his strong Christian faith and sense of adventure.

The family lived simply and enjoyed the beautiful bush surrounds. Schwarz and his wife Rosalie also had plenty of extracurricular activities, establishing education and agricultural projects. In the days of apartheid, their work didn't win friends in high places and Schwarz was twice investigated by South African authorities.

The clinical work was challenging to say the least, and sometimes Schwarz watched patients die because of his lack of resources or knowledge.

"The medicine is enormous fun if you have got the right psychology - if you don't mind getting out of your depth and failing sometimes," he says. "In medicine in Australia we are so terrified of making a mistake that we will always pass on responsibility to some higher authority, and there you can't. Your best is the best that those people can have and you have got to accept that sometimes you fail."

Schwarz returned home because he was tired and wanted his children to get established here. At 42, with not much spare change to his name, he started the practice at Camden, initially in the family home.

Now located in a spacious, modern complex with sunny garden views, it exudes comfort and serenity. Schwarz describes it as "an old fashioned practice with conscientious, caring doctors".

Christian books are on sale in the waiting room, and Time magazine, with a cover story on AIDS in Africa, is also displayed prominently. Schwarz quotes from its editorial "that if you see a crime being committed and you don't do something about it, you are as guilty as the criminal" as he explains why he has resumed his love affair with Africa.

Eighteen months ago, Schwarz and his wife took their sons back to the country where they had grown up. They visited hospitals, villages, and graveyards to make a video about the HIV catastrophe orphaning many millions of South Africans.

The trip "had a profound effect," says Schwarz. "We knew intellectually but not emotionally about it before."

When he began to show the video around Camden, money started to roll in. And so the African AIDS Foundation was born, a fledgling organisation which has already raised \$40,000 to help the orphans.

The Foundation is why Schwarz agreed, albeit reluctantly, to this profile. "I don't actually like doing this sort of stuff," he says many times about our interview. That doesn't stop him from being a warm and engaging subject, showing as much interest in my life as I am taking in his.

Schwarz has also been lobbying pharmaceutical companies to make affordable treatments available in Africa. "When drug reps come in, I'd say, 'how does it feel working for a company that kills people?'"

"I am nice to them so they don't think I am an ogre but they get a shock when I say something like that. I want it passed onto their senior people that there is an idiot out at Camden who is making a fuss."

During a recent visit to the US, Schwarz and Rosalie met senior Congressman to lobby for increased help for Africa. You might not expect an Aussie GP to have such top-level contacts - unless you know the book with pride of place on the family bookshelf, "Beating the Unbeatable Foe: One Man's Victory over Communism, Leviathan and the Last Enemy."

In it, an Australian doctor and founder of the Christian Anti-Communism Crusade, Fred Schwarz, describes his life's work as an evangelist preaching against communism. There are photos of him with Ronald and Nancy Reagan. Roy Rogers and John Wayne also feature.

John's sister, Rosemary Schwarz, now a psychiatrist in Melbourne, remembers that the US President's speech writer rang her father for advice when the Challenger space shuttle exploded. "My father was either loved or hated," she adds.

No wonder Fred's son was able to swing a meeting with the chair of the African subcommittee of the US Congress. John Schwarz blames media misreporting for helping to wrongly vilify his father as a McCarthyist during the anti-communist witch hunt of the 1950s.

His own political and social values were influenced by his experiences in Africa. He opposed feminism when he went there because of what he saw as its

effect on families, but realised that much of the AIDS problem in Africa is due to the behaviour of chauvinist men.

He became, as Rosalie says, "a raving feminist". But he is still, say those who know him best, a man of conservative views. When they say he is paternalistic, they mean it in a kind way.

"We all think he's hilarious because he really likes to know about peoples' lives but then he likes to give advice in a nice way," says daughter Kate Harris, an environmental scientist. "None of us take it the wrong way and I don't think many people do, but these days it's not a very PC thing to do."

Fred Schwarz spent most of his working life in the US, visiting his family in Sydney once or twice a year. His own experiences of an absent father made John Schwarz determined to nurture a close relationship with his own children.

Not long after he arrived back in Australia, Schwarz began caring for a young girl with a heart defect. Her own father was not on the scene and she became very close to her GP. Coralie Jackson, now 20, recently nominated Schwarz for the father-of-the-year award.

Schwarz was known as "baba" or father among the Zulus for good reason, says Rosalie, the daughter of the local Baptist Minister who met Schwarz while gluing on his beard for a nativity play. They were 16.

"He's got a huge heart," she says. "Everybody that I know leans on him. Right from when I first knew him, I had this feeling he was going to be very special to a lot of people."

Schwarz's children all have stories of their father going the extra yard to help them, whether getting up early to take them surfing, or driving long distances in the middle of the night to sick grandchildren, or coaching them through school exams.

Jane Gray, a GP, works in her father's practice, as does her husband Matthew. "I've never met anyone else who's had such a deep relationship with their father as I've got with mine," she says.

"The trust that I have in him is boundless and he's inspired me in all areas of life, particularly in my family life. He's taught me how to listen deeply to people and to enjoy listening and to hear what they are saying and therefore to enjoy

my work. Even with the mess that medicine is in at the moment, it teaches my sister and I and my husband to find the positive in it.”

Schwarz encouraged two of his daughters to study medicine after they had trained as nurses. He was horrified when oldest son John, 27, announced he was going to be an actor, seeing the arts industry as the antithesis of all the values he held dear.

But the family says it was typical that Schwarz looked for the positives in the situation, accepted his son's decision, and now doesn't miss a performance involving his sons (the youngest, Michael, is studying drama). “He couldn't have been more supportive if he had been a showbiz dad,” says John (junior).

John Whitehall, a neonatologist in Townsville, has known Schwarz since they were about five. They grew up together, with Whitehall becoming part of the Schwarz family, and remain closer than many brothers.

One of the things which sticks in Whitehall's mind about Schwarz is his physical strength. None of their sons or sons-in-law can beat him in an arm wrestle.

"I think he gets a significant amount of pleasure out of being able to beat all the young men," says Whitehall, adding that his friend has an uncomplicated personality. "There is no guile in him."

John Schwarz (junior) also emphasises his father's strength: "I see my dad as being very masculine, as being very strong and very blokey, and loving his sports and football." He tells how his father took a surf ski out in wild conditions and broke three ribs, and stitched up his own wounds after a house boating accident.

Rosemary Schwarz says: "John is the hero of all his kids." In her eyes though, he is more of “a lovely, big, gentle teddy bear”.

Despite his physical prowess, Schwarz is no stranger to the battle of the bulge, which explains why a patient recently asked if he had cancer because he was looking so trim. Over the last year, he has lost about 17 kgs on his "crackpot diet", which he started after patients lost weight on a fad diet low in carbohydrates but rich in meat and other protein sources.

Blood tests suggested it wasn't doing any harm, although nutritionists such as Rosemary Stanton are sceptical. "The likely end result of this unbalanced

method of reducing body weight is an increased risk of coronary heart disease and, if followed long-term, a possible increased risk of cancer," she says.

Schwarz is well aware of such criticisms, but believes it worth recommending to patients who can't otherwise lose weight. As his sister says, Schwarz learnt early from the example of their father that you don't have to follow the crowd.

Peter Archer, a former Baptist minister who manages the practice, has personally found Schwarz a wonderful doctor, as well as a generous, flexible employer.

"John and Rosalie give everyone who works here a gift on their birthday," he says. "I have always dreamed of having a Swiss army knife...this year, they gave me one with all the bells and whistles."

And Archer reveals something which Schwarz hadn't mentioned himself; that he is paying more than \$10,000 a year to support a Kenyan student and his family in Sydney.

Schwarz mightn't particularly like talking about himself. But he is worth hearing about.

* To donate to the African AIDS Foundation, contact PO Box 701 Narellan, NSW 2567. Ph 02 4658 0580. The Foundation is administered by the Schwarz practice, so incurs no administrative costs. Funds go to projects personally selected by Schwarz.