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: Edith Weisberg

CV IN BRIEF

1998 - present:	Director, Sydney Centre for Reproductive Health Research
1990-98:	Research Manager, Sydney Centre for Reproductive Health Research
1994-96:	Member, Australian Honours Committee
1989-98:	Medical Director, Family Planning NSW
1997:	Fellow, Australasian College of Sexual Health Physicians
1996:	Master of Medicine, University of Sydney
1983-90:	Member, NSW Privacy Committee
1974-89:	Medical Superintendent, Family Planning NSW
1960:	MBBS University of Sydney

The matriarch of family planning

Edith Weisberg seems a little surprised when I arrive for our interview which was, admittedly, arranged weeks previously. Perhaps she had forgotten I was coming? Not at all, comes the reply. I knew you were coming on a Thursday, but wasn't sure if it was this one.

Only later do I realise that this was a classic Weisberg moment. Although well known to many Australians as an authoritative voice on family planning issues, Weisberg is also known to those close to her for being, well, a bit vague at times.

She has a problem with cars (and glasses, mobile phones and anything else able to be misplaced). Three cars have been stolen in the last three years, and many remark on Weisberg's habit of losing or denting cars. One vanished after she left the keys in the ignition while paying for petrol.

“She has been known to leave wallets in hotel garbage bins - she’s legendary,” says one colleague, referring to the absent minded professor type.

Another colleague, Ian Fraser, professor in reproductive medicine at the University of Sydney, laughs when told of this description: “We’re all aware of that and have to work with it,” he says tactfully.

Of course, it doesn’t seem at all fair to focus on such matters considering Weisberg’s widely admired contributions to women’s health and family planning, in research, the clinic and public debate. It’s just that so many of her intimates are intrigued by the contrast between the slightly scatty Edith they know and the learned expert whose opinions are regularly sought, by medical colleagues and the media.

Many just assume that Weisberg, 64, has so much on her mind - as director of research at FPA Health (the new name for Family Planning NSW), as a clinician specialising in women’s health, and as an utterly devoted and involved grandmother of eight - that she doesn’t have the time or inclination for detail.

“She’s so passionate about things that she doesn’t let the practicalities of life get in the way of things she wants to achieve,” says one of Weisberg’s three children, Simon Klimt, a senior banker with Westpac.

He adds, referring to Weisberg’s tendency for lateness: “She believes that it takes five minutes to drive between any two spots in Sydney.”

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Weisberg jokes that she was not a very good family planner in her early days. She had her first child while a resident and was pregnant again by the time her residency was completed.

She took her baby daughter to work when she started part-time at a general practice in Five Dock, in Sydney’s inner west, and later also took her third baby to the office.

“I really hated general practice,” she says. “I never felt I had a good enough training or knew enough. I think it’s really the hardest form of medicine to practise because you need to know so much about so many

things. I wanted to get into an area where I could know everything about everything."

When a friend told her about Family Planning, she rang to ask if they had a training program and needed doctors.

"They said yes, and here I am," gestures Weisberg. That was in 1972 when Family Planning's main role was to dispense contraceptives. It was a time, Weisberg remembers, when it was considered unacceptable for GPs to give contraceptives to unmarried women.

It is not only social attitudes which have changed so dramatically. Family Planning, which has suffered a deal of turmoil over the years, has also evolved. These days, it is much less focused on providing services (partly in response to Commonwealth funding pressures) and much more on training doctors, nurses and pharmacists.

Weisberg is supportive of the changing direction - "we haven't got the resources to provide the community with services; our role is to make sure that the people who provide the services provide the best possible services" - although not all staff have been happy about it. The organisation also plans to extend its reach into rural areas.

Ian Fraser says medical colleagues often do not appreciate the difficulties of working in women's health. "Anything to do with sex and reproduction engenders reactions at opposite ends of the spectrum," he says.

"People have beliefs which are not always logical and many people wish to force their beliefs on others. Politicians work this area very effectively by exploiting these beliefs. The way in which women's health is managed at a political level swings from one government to another and from one month to another."

Weisberg speaks slowly, almost languidly, but doesn't give the impression of watching her words too carefully. Over the years, she has felt her share of heat, from politicians, the anti-abortion lobby and other groups.

She was once publicly denounced as “the abortion queen of Sydney”, but says: “I have never done an abortion in my life because I have three left hands and I don’t like doing procedures.”

Several years ago, Weisberg was involved in a study of RU486 as an emergency contraception when she received an unexpected call from the local police. The anti-abortion lobby had written to the NSW Minister for Health, alleging that Weisberg was breaking the law with the study.

Weisberg satisfied the police that this was not the case, but the major crime squad was then involved, and she spent a rather unpleasant hour being interviewed by them. She was also widely named in a campaign lobbying politicians to halt the study.

“It was all fairly traumatic at the time,” remembers Weisberg. “In the end, the Right to Lifers were told they couldn’t do anything and our trial went on.”

David Healy, the head of Monash University’s department of obstetrics and gynaecology, who was also involved in the RU486 research, received death threats during the controversy. He has always admired Weisberg’s personal courage to continue working in the area, and considers her “wise by name and wise by nature”.

“She’s one of the national living treasures of Australian womanhood,” Healy adds. “I can think of no more recognisable woman in Australia.” He says that a time when Australia’s access to contraceptive choices has lagged behind many other countries - including many developing nations - Dr Weisberg’s work has been particularlyimportant. “Her advocacy of the right of women to have modern methods of family planning has occurred at a time when this was quite unfashionable.”

Ian Fraser first met Weisberg more than 20 years ago when she was Family Planning’s medical director and he was appointed to chair the medical advisory committee. They have collaborated on many studies, and together set up the Sydney Centre for Reproductive Health Research. Weisberg, who describes Fraser as a mentor, is now also a clinical senior lecturer in his department at the University of Sydney.

“Edith is extraordinarily good at asking clinically relevant questions,” says Fraser. “Coming from an entirely non academic background she

now is a very well credentialled academic. It is a truism to say that she is an internationally recognised specialist in the field of family planning."

Weisberg and Fraser say they work well well together because their skills are complementary. She works quickly and does the first drafts. He is responsible for the attention to detail.

Weisberg thinks her most important contributions have been in helping increase the range of contraceptive choices: "With the reducing birthrate, women are going to have a minimum of 30 years of their life of having to use contraception; men are more and more interested because more and more are wanting to control their fertility."

Weisberg still works one day a week in private practice but no longer practises clinically with FPA.

"Family Planning changed my life; it changed my whole view of the world," she says. "Coming from a sheltered Jewish background where you were expected to be a virgin when you married, it gave me a completely new view of what people actually did and about how they lived and it broadened my horizons enormously and it gave me a lot of skills I otherwise would not have acquired.

"Family Planning has been extremely good to me and enabled me to develop in areas that I would never have believed I could. I didn't set out to be a career woman. When I got married I thought I would be perfectly happy being a wife and mother but I hated that - I'd prefer to work and pay someone to do the housework."

Not that Weisberg considers herself a feminist: "I guess I've had such bad experiences here with the radical left wing feminists that I don't want to be associated with them.

"I believe in equal rights for women. I don't believe that there is anything to be gained from changing the supremacy of men to the supremacy of women. And I don't think you can change men to be like women.

"I guess I am a peoplist - I have never thought of that phrase before. I feel for men who have no say when their partner has an abortion. I don't see men as the enemy. I actually quite like men."

Weisberg can't bear to read Germaine Greer - "I get really angry because she is so selective in what she quotes...so I generally end up throwing her books across the floor."

Wendy McCarthy, who worked with Weisberg for many years at Family Planning and remains an occasional patient, doesn't take too much notice of her claim not to be a feminist: "I never bothered to argue really because actions are larger than words."

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It is 1939. Vienna. The couple had planned to flee by boat to Palestine but are told they can't bring their young daughter. Children are not allowed on board for fear their cries will alert the British as the boat lands illegally.

So mother and daughter remain behind, waiting to hear how they might escape. Most of the woman's family have already fled. Eventually, when there seems no other option, she puts her toddler on a train of children leaving for England.

Weisberg, who was only three when her mother waved her goodbye for the last time, recently went to see a film depicting the story of the "kinder" transport. She hoped it would jig her memory so that she could remember something of her early years. But it just made her weep, picturing how alone her mother was when sending her child away.

"I didn't realise until I had children of my own how hard that must have been for my mother," says Weisberg, with tears forming. "I gather she must have thought she was going to get out because I grew up with a trunk of her clothes in my bedroom, in fact I wore some of them as I grew up."

Weisberg, who has a certificate saying that her mother died at Auschwitz, felt responsible for the death for many years, "because I was always told the story of how she stayed behind and didn't go on the boat because of me".

In England, Weisberg lived with her grandparents who ran a boarding house in Liverpool until they were declared aliens and forced to move to Manchester. After her grandmother died, her grandfather and Weisberg

sailed for Sydney when she was 13. They moved in with his daughter, a dressmaker in Sydney's eastern suburbs.

Although close to her grandfather, life was not easy. Weisberg remembers feeling different to her classmates at Sydney Girls High. "First of all because I spoke German at home; secondly because I didn't have parents like the others. I think I was quite a lonely child. My grandfather used to make me write to my father once the war ended but he very rarely replied."

Weisberg was expected to join her aunt's business at the end of year ten, but when she won a bursary, her aunt reluctantly agreed she could stay at school on the condition that she studied dress design at night. It was also a fight to get to university. Weisberg had won a Commonwealth scholarship, but her grandfather insisted she also do a book keeping course at night.

"My grandfather was a housepainter who believed in education for his sons but trades for his daughters," remembers Weisberg. She eventually dropped out of the book keeping course, but pretended she was still going. Just like she used to pretend she was going to uni when she was going out with a boyfriend her aunt didn't like.

"I was not the model child," Weisberg sighs, now regretting that she was also far from the diligent student. "I didn't do any work until six weeks before the exam. I was so immature - I'd get much more out of a course now."

Peter Goldman, a GP at Bondi, remembers that he and his friends gave Weisberg, the only woman in their group of residents at Parramatta Hospital, a hard time: "She was always the one who made the coffees while we played cards and she was always the one who had to take notes at the lectures we couldn't get to."

Goldman speaks fondly of Weisberg and says he has always admired her work: "Professionally she's one of the few people I've never heard anyone say a word against."

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Just don't call me Mr Weisberg, Peter Klimt says wearily at the end of our interview. Clearly this has happened to him before. And probably will again.

Klimt, a lawyer, is used to strangers coming up to talk to his wife when they go out. He is also used to her long hours at work. He tells the oft repeated story about how Weisberg once broke a leg shortly before she was due to fly to a medical meeting overseas, but didn't let that stop her, using a trolley to wheel herself around.

"She wouldn't like me saying this," he adds, "but she's a workaholic." In fact, Weisberg had already predicted her husband would mention this. She also expected him to remark on her alleged lack of a sense of humour. This seems to be somewhat of a family joke - in the end Klimt didn't mention it, but each of their children did.

"She takes everything you say seriously so you have to be really careful," says daughter Michelle Rosengarten. "They bait her terribly, my two brothers."

It seems a fair observation that Weisberg leans towards seriousness, especially when she starts on subjects such as economic rationalism, which she considers "totally heartless".

"My husband and kids say I am an armchair socialist and I don't practise what I preach," says Weisberg. "I say, I'd be happy to reduce my standard of living if everybody else did but my kids say I am a hypocrite."

Klimt, who also left Austria in 1939, and Weisberg recently celebrated their 41st wedding anniversary. Their similar background is not such a coincidence, says Weisberg, considering they grew up in a tightly knit community of Jewish immigrants where everyone knew everyone.

Weisberg is a member of a synagogue but describes herself as a traditional rather than religious Jew. "I don't really believe in God but I like the traditions which are very family oriented."

Weisberg is famous for cooking up a storm on the Friday nights the family gets together, when grandchildren often stay overnight. There are also many famous anecdotes about these nights, often revolving around Weisberg's frantic schedule, and as one guest dryly remarks, "that half

an hour she had allowed herself to get from Melbourne to Sydney and cook dinner".

Weisberg also has many friends, some dating back to when she first arrived in Australia. Every few months, a table at the Cosmopolitan cafe in Double Bay fills up with a noisy group of women who have maintained the ritual for many years.

For someone so well known and who seems such a strong personality, it is a surprise to hear Weisberg describe herself as shy. At functions, she often finds it difficult to approach people: "I think I often come across as rude because I think people won't know who I am and therefore I don't say hello to them."

Weisberg says lingering insecurities from her childhood are also responsible for her tendency to be critical of others - "if I could see that someone had a weakness it made me feel better that I didn't have it".

Terri Foran, the medical director of FPA Health, has worked closely with Weisberg for many years and describes her as charismatic, energetic, and inspiring because of her ability to balance professional and family commitments.

Wendy McCarthy also believes that Weisberg has been a powerful role model, showing that women can have both career and family: "She was both a workaholic and a family-aholic."

Simon Klimt adds: "She certainly puts the same passion into everything she does - she is not a person who does anything at half measure."