This is the unedited version of a profile which appeared in *Australian Doctor* in 2002. The published version may have had minor changes.

Profile: Dr John Ellard

CV in Brief: John Henry Temple Ellard AM, RFD (Reserve Forces Decoration), 78

1992:	Received highest RANZCP award, its medal of honour
1978- present:	Editor, Modern Medicine of Australia/Medicine Today
1979-1987:	Commissioner, NSW Department Corrective Services
1964-1981:	Consultant psychiatrist, RAAF
1962-1982:	Chair, Law Foundation of NSW
1952 MBBS:	Syd Uni

A WISE ELDER

Loud barking greets visitors to the Ellard family home, which perches aside a hill overlooking Sydney's Balmoral beach. On closer inspection, it turns out not to be a dog at all, just a recording of one.

It's a fitting introduction to a house that is decidedly quirky and crammed with all manner of weird and interesting things. The walls groan with shelves upon shelves of books, as well as a huge range of Asian carvings, statues and other art work.

Here is a collection of quack medicine; there is a prized piece of kitsch - a dancing, singing guinea pig; and up the stairs lies a large gathering of thimbles.

John Ellard, 78, speaks fondly about the different pieces as he points out the household's varied collections. Only later, chatting to his wife Joan on the phone, do I realise that the inner sanctum has not been breached.

That is the room where Ellard, the wise elder of Australian medicine, indulges one of his greatest passions: model railways.

"One of the reasons we bought the house was because that room would make an excellent train room," Joan says wryly. "My kids have grown up

not understanding that other people don't have train rooms. I've followed him to train exhibitions on every continent."

She adds that only very good friends and fellow train buffs, like Peter Baume (Chancellor at the ANU) are invited to that room.

Ellard has spoken often of growing up, on a farm just outside Sydney, as an only child who had little to do with other children until he was seven.

You can just picture the lonely child playing with his trains - but this would be wrong on one count. He found great pleasure in being an only child. He enjoyed his own company, was not troubled by sibling rivalry, and felt rather special.

Joan shares many of her husband's interests - philosophy, art, the welfare of prisoners - and says they know each other so well she can finish his sentences. She was also happy to be an only child, and adds that they have tried to bring up their four children as if each were an only child.

Like many others, Joan observes that Ellard created an extended family with the large psychiatry practice he ran for over three decades on Sydney's north shore.

"It was very much like a family, he was the head of the family," adds Sheila Metcalf, who was a partner in the Ellard Practice for about 30 years.

At its peak in the 1980s, close to 50 people - including 26 psychiatrists - worked there. At a time when most private psychiatrists practised solo or in small groups, it was unusual in many ways. It had teaching and mentoring programs, employed registrars, at substantial cost, and insisted its doctors take long holidays. It was also broadly based, offering differing styles of psychiatry.

"The values were not about making money," recalls former partner Keith Mayne. "It was felt that both the quality of the practice and the way you looked after yourself and looked after yourself with patients was preferable."

Beverley de Low, who managed the practice for 18 years and remains a devoted friend, adds: “There’s been a lot of misinformation that’s floated around about him - I think people would be surprised if they knew how unimportant material gain was in the practice.” She went to work for Ellard after meeting him through the Law Foundation of NSW, where she worked and which he chaired.

The reputation of the practice and Ellard’s work, often behind the scenes, with the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists, the NSW Corrections Service, and other groups, as well as his editorship of Modern Medicine of Australia (now Medicine Today) brought him significant influence in many spheres, and a prominence which is more often associated with academics than a private practitioner.

At times Ellard has been a powerful critic of the profession - he was a strong supporter of former NSW Health Care Complaints Commissioner Merrilyn Walton when she was under attack, and they remain close friends.

He also has attracted his share of critics for his strong views on subjects ranging from euthanasia (in 1996, he flew to Darwin to provide an expert opinion for one of Philip Nitschke’s patients) to drug law reform - he has argued that all recreational drugs should be freely available - and post traumatic stress disorder, which he thinks over diagnosed.

“He exposes frailties, cant and the pseudo profound probably better than anybody else that we’ve had in medicine in this country,” says Gordon Parker, professor of psychiatry at the University of NSW. “The downside is that it can be seen by other people as destructive.”

A former partner, Michael Diamond, adds: “He has enemies and I think that attests to his abilities - because he has had views that would not have been populist views.”

“He probably had more influence on the shape of psychiatry than anyone else,” says Jonathan Phillips, a protégée and former partner,who now heads the Committee of Presidents of Medical Colleges. “He was one of the giants in psychiatry in an age which allowed for giants.”

Parker and some other senior psychiatrists have memories of being called “boy” or “sonny boy” by their elder, although Ellard’s memory on this differs.

The Ellard Practice was devastated in 1996 by allegations of sexual misconduct involving a partner, Alexander Craigie Macfie. Macfie, who was later deregistered, was widely liked and admired.

It was traumatic for Ellard, who took immediate action once the allegations came to his attention. Not only had they been close friends but Ellard, chair of the College’s board of practice standards, was a long-standing campaigner on ethical issues. He pursued Harry Bailey over the Chelmsford disaster, and also helped investigations into the scandal at Townsville’s Ward 10B.

In 1999, Ellard retired and the practice broke up. Ellard says it was a legal decision, out of concern the partners could be held liable for any claims against Macfie. Others saw it as a generational change, that the younger family members wanted to spread their wings.

Ellard has not worked clinically since, but still does medico-legal work, and also lectures to judges, lawyers, and the like.

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When Ellard was a sleep-deprived intern at the Royal North Shore Hospital 50-odd years ago, he was woken to attend to a man who could not sleep because of “the trumpeting of elephants”. Ellard blushes to recall that he prescribed intramuscular paraldehyde.

Next morning Ellard was himself woken by trumpeting - and realised that a circus was parked nearby.

The lesson, he wrote in Modern Medicine, was “that when a patient told me something, no matter how far it was outside my expectations, it was to be accepted until I had clear evidence to the contrary. I didn’t know as much as I thought I knew, and it’s not always easy to discover who has the delusions.”

This is classic Ellard. A simple, beautifully written story which holds himself up as a lesson to others. Over the years, Ellard has written widely on diverse aspects of medicine, the law and philosophy.

His writings - published in two collections, “Some Rules for Killing People” and “Anatomy of Miracles” - are distinguished by a droll humour, elegant style, historical depth, and the synthesis of complex issues.

One of his most famous spoofs, “A proof of the beneficial effects of psychotherapy”, comparing the effects of psychotherapy delivered by galahs or labradors, took the mickey out of jargon, amongst other things.

Considering his genteel way with the written word, it is a surprise to learn Ellard can swear like a trooper, thanks to his time in the military. When a NSW Commissioner for Corrective Services dealing with prisoner riots and other strife, he found it easy to talk to the prisoners because he knew the lingo.

Ellard suffered from attention deficit disorder in his youth, and also has the unusual ability to “mirror write”. He also claims a terrible memory, saying his big art collection helps remind of places he has been.

Friends and family are not entirely convinced. “He can remember things he wants to remember,” says daughter Katie Ellard, a gastroenterologist. “If it’s some tedious person he’s met at some social function, he will not remember them, but he will remember a reference that is useful to an article he wants to write.”

Ellard was 18 when he joined the army during World War Two, working in radar and artillery. After two years, he manoeuvred himself into the army psychology unit in Sydney, learning on the job how to diagnose patients in the main service psychiatric hospital.

War over, he decided to study medicine and become a psychiatrist, which meant first qualifying as a physician: “In those days to be a psychiatrist meant you were hopelessly in the grip of alcohol or you couldn’t make a living in general practice.”

He adds: “I was always very grateful I had those years before I did medicine because you learnt a bit of cunning and resourcefulness in the army.”

Ellard continued his military involvement, working with the RAAF reserve for almost 20 years, and flew many missions during the Vietnam War, as part of a study on pilot fatigue. He is not easily drawn on his war experiences, other than saying you learn a lot about yourself in such situations, and that he doesn't go to war cemeteries because he can't stop crying in them.

After a courtship stretching for more than a decade, he and Joan married in 1953 and, from all accounts, have been a wonderful match. They delight in the different ways of their children, proud that one was a punk, another has a passion for surfing, and that another made his name as a musician with the electronic group Severed Heads.

"We've shared not many downs and lots of ups and it's been quite entertaining," says Joan, whose career included stints as the NSW Health Department and NSW Supreme Court librarian, and also sat on the NSW Parole Board for many years.

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Ellard once began an article on euthanasia thus: "What I have to say in this matter must be brief and without subtlety, for being neither a lawyer nor a philosopher I am unlettered in such things. I am a practising doctor from the suburbs with no more art than being that entails."

It is typical self-deprecation, but an illusion that fools no-one who knows Ellard, least of all himself. Ellard is neither a simple nor an easy man to get to know, and easily deflects questions he doesn't feel like answering.

"Not much," he replies when asked, have you thought about why you are like the way you are? "It's the way I am. Thinking about it wouldn't make any difference."

He speaks in the manner of a kindly grandfather, but there is also a sense of impatience. It is said that he doesn't suffer fools gladly and doesn't forgive or forget easily.

Bill Barclay was director of NSW psychiatric services in the 1960s when Ellard and his good mate Paul Ramsay came to talk about establishing a

private psychiatric hospital, the Northside Clinic. They wanted to make it more like a home than hospital.

Barclay laughs when asked about Ellard's liking for talking of himself as a simple man: "You could be associated with him for a lifetime perhaps and not know a great deal about him," he says. "I think he's a very private person."

Jonathan Phillips concurs: " You are dealing with one of the most complex persons in Australian medicine even though he will put himself as one of the simplest. John is the most powerful person I have ever met, and I have met a lot of powerful people."

Judy Passlow, co-publisher of Medicine Today, says: "He's incredibly complicated, as very interesting people often are. I've known him for 20 years, but there are a lot of closed doors and windows that I haven't been behind, however I think I've been privileged to see a lot more than a lot of other people would have.

"I can imagine that some people who don't know him might have thought of him as being a fairly intimidating person and I'm sure he could be if he needed to be, but in actual fact he's a deeply caring man."

These days Ellard's health is not great - he has had peripheral vascular disease for years and had surgery on a blocked carotid artery many years ago - and he shows the physical wear of ageing. It probably strikes me harder, not having seen him for some years, because the mug shot in his journal is so out of date.

Ellard has written of Western society's disrespect for the aged (see breakout box) but seems at peace with his lot. "Arriving at this stage of my life I'm contented, doing what interests me," he says.

Apart from work, he keeps busy with his trains and other obsessions - the flight simulator, reading and buying yet more books. He does not follow fiction or films - "if you're dealing with real people, the last thing you'd want to do is to watch two dimensional people pretending to be someone else".

In a piercing essay on middle age, Ellard once wrote that “the mature person can accept that there are certain immutables in life. He enjoys what he can, acknowledges the rest, and gets on with it”.

It is a philosophy which obviously has stood him in good stead.

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Breakout Box of Ellard-isms

“I wish I had the strength of mind completely to grasp and to follow two precepts: that all permanence is illusion, and that the root of all suffering lies in wanting things.” 1983

“In Western communities people tend to be valued for what they own, how much they earn, how famous they are or what they look like. Most elderly people do not own much, earn little, are not famous at all and have lost such conventional beauty as they may have had in the first place.” 1988

“Nothing in medicine is simple but it can be made more complicated than it is if one works on it.” 2001

“It cannot be denied that there are seductive situations, and attractive patients and clients. If you do not see them, then you are keeping your eyes shut, very tightly. That works well enough provided that you manage to keep them shut. It is not a guaranteed defence; one day you may be tempted to peep for the first time and - unaccustomed to what is revealed - be swept away to unfamiliar territories. Experience in many branches of medicine shows that it is better to be in touch with one’s emotions and deal with them rather than to believe that logic and reason will always prevail.” 2001

“To believe that passing law regulating the use of drugs without first dealing with the social, physical and psychological conditions which can cause so much distress is not only naive but cruel.” 1995

“Post-traumatic stress disorder is one of this generation’s epidemics, and the growing wave of enthusiasm for it as a diagnosis may disadvantage many whose suffering is real. The only certainty is that it will be replaced by another epidemic in due course.” 1997

“Some of my friends and some of my patients have certain qualities. They own large and expensive houses which they see only during the hours of darkness. They spend hours in committees with people whom they do not particularly like, directing the affairs of organisations about which they entertain a deep scepticism. They are so busy performing their professional duties that they have little time to step back and think about what they are doing, let alone to contemplate what the rest of the world up to. Their families are not so much essential parts of their lives as follow occupants of a lair to which they retreat. Much of their time with their children is spent in argument and mutual disapproval. They are wealthy, they wear uncomfortable clothes on hot days and they are always looking over their shoulders. No one really knows them but everyone knows their names. By western standards they are successful.” 1983

“I suspect that the social standing of the ordinary doctor reached its zenith some three or four decades ago and is now on the way down.”