

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

Profile: Professor Michael Kidd: Presidential Profile

CV in BRIEF

2002- president, RACGP

2001 Independent chair, General Practice Representative Group

1997-2002 Chair, General Practice Computing Group

1995 Professor of General Practice, University of Sydney

1989 FRACGP

1983 MBBS University of Melbourne

THE CALM AFTER THE STORM

When he heard about his old friend's plans for a new job, Associate Professor Branko Cesnik had just one question: why the hell do you want it?

Professor Cesnik also had an answer. "I guess it's like buying shares - the best time to buy them is when they're at bottom price and the only way is up."

That's one way to look at the decision of Michael Kidd, professor of general practice at the University of Sydney, to take on the presidency of the strife-ridden RACGP. Things are already so bad, surely they couldn't get any worse.

But there's no doubting that Kidd has taken a gamble. It is not only his professional standing and credibility that will be at stake over the next two years; some believe the very survival of the College is hanging in the balance.

At least one of his colleagues was surprised by the move.

"It's not the sort of thing that a busy professor of general practice normally does," says Professor John Murtagh, who was a mentor to Kidd at Monash University. "It's risk-taking...because it's a political job, and he's taking on a mess."

Professor Murtagh adds: “I think he’s the right person for the job.”

It’s difficult to find anyone who disagrees. Kidd may have drawn a mere 1300-odd votes from the College’s 10,000-strong membership, reflecting a voter turnout of less than 30 per cent, but there is no question of his widespread support.

At another time, the notion of an academic president - Kidd is the first professor of general practice to lead the College - might have raised hackles.

But with general agreement that the College needs to refocus on core business - education, training and standards - Kidd’s academic background has been well-received.

Equally, many hope that his personal style - he is known for favouring consensus over conflict - will help build some much-needed bridges of reconciliation, both within and outside the College.

So why did he want the job?

“It’s something which I thought would be an interesting challenge,” says Kidd carefully. “And it’s an opportunity for me to give something back to the College, which has given an awful lot to me.”

During a somewhat torturous interview in his university office in the Balmain Hospital complex, it becomes clear that what Kidd doesn’t say is just as revealing as what he is prepared to commit to the public record.

He watches his words carefully, retracting comments which could be seen as even remotely critical of colleagues.

The only issue he is prepared to discuss in depth is his “six point plan”, which focuses on restoring the College, promoting GPs’ achievements and quality care, and developing a unified professional voice.

He is reluctant to talk about anything personal, initially refusing even to give his age on the grounds that it’s not relevant. Others might disagree, given a widespread perception that Kidd, at 42, represents generational change.

At the end of the interview, I'm not sure whether Kidd is just very reserved, or a canny strategist treading carefully across delicate ground.

Most likely it was a bit of both, say his colleagues and friends. Luckily some are prepared to help flesh out a picture of the professor known for his diverse interests, spanning IT, HIV medicine, and quality and safety of care.

He is very ambitious, committed to making a difference, charming, and visionary about the future of general practice, they say. And a snappy dresser, who's known for enjoying the finer things of life, for taking off his glasses before being photographed, and for a cheeky humour.

He's is also known for attention to detail - verging on the pedantic, say some - and for being impeccably organised, a witty public speaker, and a perfectionist.

He is so focused, according to one story he has told colleagues, that when he was a teenager determined to get the marks for medicine, he moved out of home, away from noisy siblings, to live with his grandmother so he could concentrate on his studies.

On a recent Tuesday night, in one of the large function rooms of the Burswood Casino in Perth, a bunch of solemn-looking people in fancy dress took the stage. The procession was lead, symbolically, by a GP registrar.

The night before, the atmosphere at the College's annual general meeting was much less formal. The executive knew it would face some tough questions about the \$7 million hole in College's finances, amongst other issues.

On the Tuesday, however, the mood was more dignified. After speeches by visiting dignitaries and the presentation of prizes, a heavy gold chain was ceremoniously removed from outgoing president Dr Paul Hemming and placed on Kidd's shoulders.

It was an emotional night for Kidd for many reasons. He had chaired the judging committee for the inaugural prize commemorating one of his old colleagues and friends, the late Professor Chris Silagy. The prize was presented by Silagy's brother.

Kidd and Silagy became close friends while general practice academic registrars at Monash, where Kidd's doctorate of medicine examined computer-based medical education. They also shared a history in the scouts and a forward-looking, international view of health.

"They were very focused people who saw that general practice was going to be increasingly influential in health care delivery and had the potential to be more influential than any of the specialities and that it was really an untapped resource in directing the future of health care," says Associate Professor Jill Gordon, head of the department of medical education at the University of Sydney.

Throughout his academic career, Kidd has continued to practise part-time. In 1992, he began working at the Victorian AIDS Council clinic, motivated by personal and professional reasons. Like many gay men, he had lost friends to HIV, and as a doctor, he was aware of a pressing need for GPs in the area.

When Kidd moved to Sydney to take up his current chair of general practice - at just 35 - his interest in HIV continued. He has worked for several years with well known HIV GP, Dr Marilyn McMurchie, and their practice recently merged with another prominent group in Darlinghurst.

He wrote the chapter on HIV/AIDS in the Oxford Textbook of Primary Medical Care, as well as the one on computers.

Kidd takes a broad approach to community service - he cites the "four pillars of academia" as education, research, professional and community development and clinical service. He visited Chernobyl after the nuclear disaster to help care for affected children, and also volunteered his services during the Sydney Olympics.

Asked what he likes best about his work, out of the multitude of academic, clinical, committee and organisational roles, Kidd gives no sign of being overwhelmed by the load. He enjoys it all: "I bounce out of bed every morning."

Despite the enormity of the challenges facing the College, many believe Kidd has the necessary skills. Clearly he has great energy, enthusiasm and capacity, and his diverse interests mean he has a wide network of support. He also has the benefit of a warm welcome from other GP groups, and many fresh faces on the new College Council.

“His biggest challenge is going to be unifying the Council and unifying the profession behind him,” says Dr Hemming.

“I think he’s got to be given a few months to get to know the lie of the land, to work out all of the aspects of the position before he pushes forward in any particular direction. I think Michael is very mindful of that. I don’t think he wants to rush ahead with ideas and vision that are going to put too many people offside.”

Neil Carson, emeritus professor of community medicine at Monash who was an early mentor to Kidd, says his rapid rise in academia suggests he has the necessary political nous. Another colleague notes that Kidd knows how to work government processes to get what he wants.

Cesnik, director of the Centre of Medical Informatics at Monash, adds: “He’s quite good at being a political animal. But he won’t compromise what he believes to be correct or right.”

Jo Watson, executive officer of the National Association of People living with HIV/AIDS, says Kidd has the ability to get disparate groups working together, as exemplified by his chairing of the National HIV Committee.

“He’s really approachable,” she says. “He’s a very good facilitator. He doesn’t pull rank or throw his weight around.”

She adds that he is also conscientious. “He is a committee person who will read the papers, do the work, come to meetings well prepared and get a sense of the different positions that people are holding. He really does put the homework in and that makes such a difference.”

Others believe Kidd’s personal qualities - he’s a “true diplomat” says one old friend - will be an asset. No doubt that’s why he was asked to be the independent chair of the General Practice Representative Group.

“I don't think I've ever seen him be angry,” says Dr Graeme Miller, medical director of the Family Medical Research Centre at Sydney University. “He has a high level of equanimity. When attacked, he will ask why, rather than react. It will be useful not only in the job of president but also in relationship to other groups.”

Dr Liz Marles, a lecturer in general practice at the University of Sydney adds: “He is open to being criticised; he is not someone who is going to hold a grudge; he will hear what people have to say and take it on board.”

Associate Professor Andrew Grulich, president of the Australasian Society of HIV Medicine, says that Kidd's time as treasurer of the society bodes well for the College. “He was a very prudent financial manager, the sort of treasurer who would always be raising a voice of caution or counsel whenever people were advocating new projects that had resource implications.”

Associate Professor Wes Fabb, who has worked with Kidd for years in the World Organisation of Family Doctors (WONCA), adds. “Sometimes people stretch themselves too far and they start to become inefficient - but not Michael. He's just a very talented, hard working, devoted person. I couldn't have a higher opinion of anyone than I have of Michael.”

Chris Del Mar, professor of general practice at the University of Queensland, thinks Kidd's election is a sign of maturing of general practice. To have an academic in the position is a comment on the “intellectual growth” of the discipline, he says.

Since the beginning of this year, Kidd has been regularly getting together with young Australians to talk about issues such as sex, drugs and alcohol. He is introduced as “medical Michael” to listeners of the ABC youth radio network JJJ.

“He is very proper in the way he conducts himself,” says JJJ announcer Rosie Beaton, “and he is very meticulous in what he says.”

Beaton asks about what Kidd's new gig with the College will entail. After a brief explanation, she says: “Oh, I get it, he's the calm after the storm.”

That's certainly what a lot of people are hoping.

KIDD'S PLAN

1. To develop the College as a strong, viable professional organisation with sound principles of governance and management and to return it to a sound financial base.
2. For the College to continue as a national leader for setting standards for training and quality of care.
3. To promote the achievements of GPs and to justify their sense of pride in their work.
4. To enhance the College's leadership and advocacy on the role of general practice.
5. To increase the College's capacity to accurately forecast what the future holds for general practice and to have a process for continuing to revise that vision over time.
6. To share our experience with other professional organisations and accept responsibility for fostering unity between GP organisations and providing a unified voice for dealings with government.