



Dr Jim Leavesley AM – General practitioner, medical historian, broadcaster, author

Born Blackpool, England, 2 March 1929. Died Perth, Australia, 29 May 2019

Dr Jim Leavesley began performing vasectomies in 1971. He wanted to follow up these patients, making some patient-free time on Wednesday afternoons in order to do so.

Jim thought some academic help would add methodological rigour to his study. The newly opened Murdoch University was close to his practice and Jim enrolled as a postgraduate student. That caused some difficulty, since Murdoch University did not have a medical faculty nor a single medico on the academic staff.

The lateral-thinking director of postgraduate studies reasoned that population control could come under the rubric of environmental control. Jim thus became the first postgraduate student of Professor Peter Newman, the foundation professor of environmental studies.

Jim's thesis was titled, 'The effects of vasectomy on men and their wives'.

Jim surveyed his first 50 patients and, separately, their wives. None chose to abstain from the study. He also surveyed a random sample of 50 couples who were using other methods of contraception.

The study was marked and commended by Dr Stephanie Siedlecki, a Melbourne-based expert in family planning who achieved worldwide recognition for her warnings about the toxic-shock danger of long-acting tampons.

The most dramatic result of Jim's study was that half of the women stated that their general health improved after their husband's vasectomy.

He summarised this work in his inimitable style, 'He had the operation and she felt better'.

The study resulted in a Master of Philosophy (MPhil) from Murdoch University, two publications in *Australian Family Physician* and the FH Faulding Research Fellowship.

Jim's study added to the general understanding of the male psyche, especially regarding castration anxiety and male mastery.

Vasectomy was then, as now, of great interest to husbands and wives. Jim's expertise in this area, his mellifluous Blackpool variant of the Lancastrian accent, and his ability to encapsulate the essence of a story into one memorable sentence rapidly established him as a regular contributor on ABC radio for more than 30 years.

Never one to rest on his laurels, Jim kept snipping. He performed 2800 vasectomies between 1972 and 1984, all in his own general practice rooms.

A 'cricket tragic', Jim was captain and opening batsman of the Liverpool University cricket team in his medical student years. Had he scored 2800 runs during that time he may well have had another career with the English cricket team. But then he would never have won the Faulding Prize nor endowed the West Australian Medical Museum's annual Leavesley lecture.

John Durham was elected Chair of RACGP WA in September 1979. But before he had chaired even a single meeting, his wife was offered a high-status position in the New Zealand Department of Health.

As Deputy Chair, Jim stepped in and served out his two years as Chair.

On a visit to the faculty, Jim noticed that John Durham's name – and not his own – was on the Honour Board. He called the Provost (me) and demanded that this error be corrected, forthwith. This was done to Jim's satisfaction (and mine).

– Dr Max Kamien. Based on interviews with Jim Leavesley on 29 May 2018 and 5 June 2018.

Not your ordinary GP – Obituary by Patrick Cornish, *The West Australian*, 18 June 2019

The ailments of murderers and prime ministers past their prime and a fisherman's sons who were the first properly recorded Siamese twins – every type of anatomical oddity fascinated Jim Leavesley. He spoke with silver tongue on radio; he was the gold standard as author of medical history books such as *Mere Mortals* and *Not Your Ordinary Doctor*.

He wrote of the crushing of King Henry VIII by his armour-clad horse that fell on top of His Majesty, and the 'flatulence, constipation and giddiness' of Napoleon. It was never too late for Jim to investigate and diagnose. For this doctor it was definitely a case of the malady lingers on.

Jim was a GP in South Perth whose mind reached far and resonated with the great Russian dramatist and doctor Anton Chekhov, who wrote that 'Medicine is my lawful wife and literature my mistress. When I grow weary with one, I pass the night with the other. Neither suffers because of my infidelity'.

Jim's love of history and knowledge of medicine intersected neatly in his association with the WA Medical Museum, of which he was President for over 25 years. The annual Leavesley Lecture was a fundraising event where audiences partook of cheese, wine and the speaker's wit. In 2011, for example, his topic was 'The Master of Medical Murder – Dr Harold Shipman'. This English serial killer's career enthralled his audience as usual, though Jim lightened the mood by assuring all present that Shipman was an exception.

Jim was keen on prescribing praise for others. His commendation of Margot Bray, a former honorary curator of the museum, appeared in her obituary: 'She was organised, innovative, authoritative and made things happen. The place is now more customer-friendly, especially for visiting school parties and probationer nurses from teaching hospitals'.

On the other hand, Jim retained a touch of modesty regarding his own talents. As a fifth-former at Blackpool Grammar in Lancashire, he had listened avidly while an old boy of the school, Alistair Cooke – doyen among



Jim Leavesley in his honorary doctoral regalia from Murdoch University, taken by Max Kamien in about 2014.

doyens of radio presenters – addressed morning assembly. Jim, asked in later years if he saw himself as another Cooke, preferred to describe himself as 'merely a sous-chef' in comparison.

Blackpool is where James Harrison Leavesley was born on 2 March, 1929, and raised as the only child of Hilda (nee Harrison) and Arthur Leavesley. They shared his pride at winning a place at the University of Liverpool. His graduation in 1953 coincided with both the coronation of Queen Elizabeth and the visit to England of the Australian cricket team. A keen player and spectator of the sport, Jim revelled in the host country's series victory and retained his love of cricket for the rest of his days. The advent of limited-overs versions was acceptable, though the players' innovation of garish gear was not. Discussing last year's ball-tampering incident in an Australia-South Africa test match, he was relieved to note that 'at least they were dressed in white'.

In 1954 Jim married Gwen Clayton, a fellow Liverpool medical graduate. Three years later, with Gwen pregnant, they emigrated to WA, sponsored by Jim's

uncle, Arthur Leavesley, who had emigrated in 1913. As a GP, Jim became known for kindness as well as professional expertise.

Gwen became not only a mother of three but a prominent member of WA's healthcare community. In the 1970s she helped found the Family Planning Association of WA and became its first medical director.

After divorce, Jim married Margaret Packham, becoming stepfather to her daughter Jane and son John.

Writing a fortnightly column for the newspaper *Australian Doctor*, and radio broadcasts that showcased his best 'mikeside manner', led to writing nine books under his own name and three with Dr George Biro. Jim's dedication to *Not Your Ordinary Doctor*, published in 2010, reads: 'To Robyn Williams and Brigitte Seega of the ABC Radio National Science Unit for their help and encouragement in my writing and broadcasting over the last 28 years'. In 1993 Jim was appointed Member of the Order of Australia for service to medicine and medical history. He was awarded an MPhil by Murdoch University for a thesis on the domestic impact of vasectomies.

For most of their 27 years together Jim and Margaret lived at Margaret River and then Halls Head, Mandurah.

Jim, who died on May 29, is survived by Margaret, his daughter Anne, sons David and Mark, and eight grandchildren.

Among the friends and medical colleagues who cherish the Leavesley legacy is Dr Max Kamien, Jim's successor as president of the Medical Museum, who has long forgiven his prolific reliance on a UWA secretary's work time.

'Jim was a part-time senior lecturer in the department of general practice in the 1980s,' he recalls.

'He and I shared the typing services of Wendy Noris, who spent so much time typing Jim's books that I found it difficult to get my administrative letters typed. I asked Wendy to prioritise department work over Jim's histories. She replied, "But his work is so much more interesting".'

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