

Dr Anne Sheila Fisher (nee Crabtree)

MBBS, FRACGP

16 October 1930 – 24 February 2021

A role model and modest pioneer

Anne Fisher was a modest woman who sought to better understand how mental health issues and emotional wellbeing affected a person's health. She was a trail blazer and pioneer whose achievements often went unrecognised.

Born on 16 October 1930 in Cardiff, Wales, Anne was the middle child of Cyril and Marjorie Crabtree. Cyril was a real estate agent and Marjorie was a nurse. During World War I, Marjorie was a member of the Voluntary Aid Detachment, a voluntary civilian nurse to injured military. Anne credits her mother's nursing experience as the catalyst that led her to a career in medicine.

After finishing high school at Malvern Girls' College, Anne applied to study medicine at Oxford University, but was told she was too young (at the age of 19). She then applied to London University, St Bartholomew's Hospital Medical College (known as Barts), and was accepted. This was London University's second intake of women into medicine.

When she graduated in 1954, she gained a position as house surgeon at Royal West Sussex Hospital in Chichester. She was the equivalent of the surgical resident to the registrar, Eric Fisher, a recently arrived Australian, and they fell in love. However, she would often complain that he didn't teach her very much, as he always insisted on doing her medical procedures so they could finish quickly and go out to dinner.

On 15 October 1955, they were married in Cardiff and had their reception in her parents' garden.



Anne and Eric Fisher's wedding in 1955.



Anne Fisher meeting the Queen at King Edward VII Hospital Midhurst in 1956.

Anne and Eric worked at King Edward VII Hospital in Midhurst, and in 1956, had the privilege of being introduced to Queen Elizabeth during a royal anniversary visit to the hospital.

In the same year, they set sail to Australia on the SS Tasmania Star. Eric worked as the ship's doctor to pay their way. They landed in Geelong, Victoria, on 22 November 1956, the first day of the Melbourne Olympic Games.

Eric had wooed Anne with the promise of an idyllic life in rural New South Wales, a place they could work together as doctors and take over his father's practice, but West Wyalong was nothing like the cool green hills of Wales. It was 482 km from Sydney and hot, and compared with Britain, seemed quite primitive; there were flies, dust and dirt roads. Anne had never encountered roads like this before. Not long after she arrived, she was asked to drive her mother-in-law to judge a flower show in a nearby town. Several drivers passed her on the road and reported to Eric (before she got home) that she was very brave driving with a flat tyre. Anne had no idea, she just thought it was a very bumpy road.



Anne and Eric in West Wyalong in the 1970s.

Anne and Eric made their home in the private hospital built by Eric's father in West Wyalong. They converted it to a family home and surgery. As money was short, they took out a bank loan to buy a car and renovate the hospital. For the first few years, they slept on two hospital beds pushed together to save money.

They had four children together: Jenny in 1958, twins Tony and Kathy in 1959, and Peter in 1962. All four children were born in Sydney at the Royal Hospital for Women in Paddington.

In 1963, Jenny started school and managed to bring home every contagious disease, including measles, mumps and chicken pox, and generously shared them with her siblings. This was also the year the other medical practice in town closed, leaving Anne and Eric to care for some 9000 people living in the town and surrounding area on their own. For Anne, that year passed in a blur of exhaustion.

With four children, a demanding medical practice and a husband who played a major part in local organisations, Anne was the glue that held the family together, as well as a much-loved doctor to patients in the town.

In the late 1960s, Anne established and ran a school medical service in the area. She travelled to outlying schools with a nurse in a caravan that was purpose-built to undertake key childhood assessments, such as eyesight and hearing. This proved to be an effective way of identifying childhood problems and illnesses through routine examinations.

Working as a GP in rural New South Wales, at a time when there was no Air Ambulance and the nearest specialist was 160 km away by road, meant that Anne took on many diverse and challenging roles. This included delivering babies, responding to trauma from motor vehicle accidents, and being an anaesthetist and surgeon, as well as diagnosing and treating chronic illnesses and infectious diseases. Through it all, she was a conscientious and compassionate doctor.

She always felt very welcome in West Wyalong, despite being a 'blow-in', and made many lifelong friends. In 2015, at the 80th anniversary of the West Wyalong Hospital Auxiliary, she said, 'I've always felt welcome in West Wyalong. There's a piece of a Welsh girl's heart that will always live in this town.'

Anne always had an interest in mental health. She said it stemmed from wanting to better understand her brothers, who both experienced mental health problems and alcoholism. In the 1960s, she and Eric attended some innovative workshops where they watched videos of therapists encouraging patients to express emotion. At first, they were horrified that a doctor would encourage people to cry, but they both introduced counselling into their medical practice. They held the view that emotions play a large part in our health and wellbeing. In fact, their children report, they could never get sick without being asked 'What's really the problem?', which was code for 'You must be stressed or upset about something.'

In the late 1960s, Anne and Eric joined the RACGP as founding members and later became lifetime Fellows of the college.

In 1974, with all four children in boarding school in Sydney, Anne insisted that the family move to Sydney. To support the family, she took a position as a medical officer at Forest Lodge Child Health Centre (1975), then at Kalparrin Community Health Centre in Campsie (1975–76) doing school medicals while Eric did locums and looked for a place to set up a general practice.

In 1976, Anne worked as a medical officer at Rozelle Hospital (1976–81) and was encouraged to study psychiatry, so she sought a position as a Medical Officer at Rozelle Hospital (1976–81). She studied for five years and took her exams in 1981 at the age of 50. Unfortunately, she was unsuccessful in becoming a psychiatrist. Instead, she took her newfound knowledge back into general practice and joined Eric in North Sydney. While in general practice, she was an associate in general practice at Royal North Shore Hospital and a visiting medical officer at the Mater Hospital.

Anne's contributions to the RACGP included being the college representative on the Ministers' Advisory Council on Cervical Screening (1988–90). She was also a committee member of the Medical Women's Society of NSW (1982–89) and Warringah Medical District Association (1984–85).

She worked as a GP until she was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1998. When she retired, she became involved in voluntary work and enjoyed spending time with her family and learning about the arts.

After Eric died in 2016, Anne continued enjoying life until her death on 24 February 2021.

She will be remembered as a role model for our generation, combining professional life and raising a family; as a compassionate doctor who combined excellent diagnostic skills with a generous dose of empathy; as a caring person who put family above all else; and as a Welsh girl who brought her heart to Australia.

By Jenny Fisher (Anne's daughter)

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