

*Richard (Dick)
William Roberts
MBBS, DCH,
FRACGP*



Born: 24 February 1926

Died: 31 March 2012

Paediatrician and general practitioner (GP), Dick Roberts was a physician of great physical presence and generous spirit. He had a lifelong interest in the social and cultural parameters of healthcare and was an office holder and stalwart for the activities of The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP). Dick was one of the founders of The St Andrews Medical Group in Midland, a solo GP in remote Western Australia (WA), a Director of Child and Community Services at the Health Department of WA and the first Medical Director of the Kalgoorlie District Hospital.

The second of three boys, Dick Roberts was born in Kew, Melbourne. His father was an engineer. Dick was a student at Carey Grammar and Scotch College. After leaving school, he enlisted in the Royal Australian Navy. At the end of the Second World War he was an able seaman on the light cruiser, HMAS Hobart. The Hobart was in Tokyo Bay on Victory over Japan Day (2 September 1945) when the Japanese Instrument of Surrender was signed on board the battleship USS Missouri.

After demobilisation from the Navy, Dick enrolled at the Melbourne Medical School at the University of Melbourne. In 1953 he came to WA to do his residency at Fremantle Hospital.

In 1954, Dick became one of the founders of the St Andrews Medical Group practice in Midland, Perth. This became a large healthcare centre. One of its innovations was to provide financial support for the medical partners who wished to take time off from the practice to pursue specialist qualifications. Dick returned to Melbourne to work at the Royal Melbourne Children's Hospital in 1963. The following year, he worked and studied in the UK at hospitals in Edinburgh and Newcastle. In 1964, he obtained his Diploma in Child Health from the Royal College of Physicians of London. Other partners became qualified in surgery, medicine, obstetrics and anaesthesia.

Around 1965, Dick returned to Midland, WA and became established as a highly competent and compassionate GP. He also provided a neonatal service at the Swan District Hospital. Like his grandfather, the famous Australian landscape and portrait painter Tom Roberts, Dick had huge hands. His gentle handling of neonates with these hands was a remarkable sight and was often commented on by parents and nurses.

His interest in continuing medical education for GPs gave rise to the Swan District Clinical Society that met at that hospital every fortnight.

Dick was an early Member of the then Australian College of General Practitioners and was appointed a Fellow in 1968. He began his long association with the West Australian Faculty in 1969. It was then comprised of 8 fellows, 146 members and 16 associates. The annual membership fee was \$16.80. Meeting facilities and secretarial assistance were provided by the WA Branch of the Australian Medical Association in West Perth.

Dick was immediately appointed to the panel of examiners. He became Faculty Censor in 1973 and continued in that role until 1977. He was one of the College's pathfinders in pressing for the need of vocational training for general practice.

He took on many other leadership roles within the College. He was the Liaison Officer for College Council in South-East Asia and helped establish the Singapore College of General Practitioners. From 1971 to 1974 he was a member of the College Council and on the Working Party of the University of Western Australia (UWA) Faculty of Medicine that led to the establishment of a University Department of General Practice.

Dick had a broad view of the task of medicine. He encouraged the faculty to extend its community horizons by becoming involved with the UWA Summer School. He organised a course on 'Social issues and medicine' and gave one of the lectures titled, 'Living in an anxious society'.

In 1973 he resigned from the St Andrews Practice to take up the position of Director of Child Services at the Health Department of WA. In 1976 this was expanded to include Community Services. Dick became that department's inaugural director. He had a particular concern for socially disadvantaged families and obtained the funding for the establishment of the much needed Child Development Centre.

After 5 years as a senior public servant, he returned to general practice. He and his wife Rae, a senior community health nurse, were welcomed with open arms when they set up a general practice in the doctor-less town of Ravensthorpe, 540 km south-east of Perth. They stayed for 11 years, until 1989.

Dick then took up a position as the first Medical Director of the Kalgoorlie District Hospital. He returned to Perth in 1991 and continued to work part time in general practice and in palliative care. Many of his old friends and patients continued to call on him for advice and care.

He was a friendly, humble and thoughtful man. He had the rare capacity to focus his whole attention on the person to whom he was listening. That was the reason for his popularity and effectiveness as a doctor, an administrator and as a friend to many.

He is survived by his wife Rae, his three daughters, Anna, Vicki and Kathryn and two grandsons, Nicholas and Michael.

Hugh Cook

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Max Kamien

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