When reflecting on the general practice career of South Australia’s Assoc Prof John Litt, one of the most oft-repeated healthcare adages comes to mind: prevention is better than cure.

Assoc Prof Litt has had a sustained interest in prevention for more than 35 years. As one of the driving forces behind many of the RACGP’s guidelines in areas such as smoking cessation, immunisation, disease prevention, abuse and violence, and men’s health, he has spent a significant amount of his career working to help improve patient outcomes by assisting GPs in their implementation of a range of clinical and prevention activities.

‘I would hope that we have made an impact by having people look at prevention more seriously,’ he told Good Practice. While a contributor to many other guidelines, Assoc Prof Litt was most deeply involved in the development of the RACGP’s Putting prevention into practice: Guidelines for the implementation of prevention in the general practice setting (Green Book), which was first published in 1996. The Green Book offers GPs a framework and a variety of effective strategies to improve the delivery of prevention activities.

‘We know what to do, but we don’t necessarily know the best way of doing it,’
Assoc Prof Litt said. ‘The Green Book largely was what was known best practice and what framework would assist people to deliver that.’

Material for the current edition of the Green Book was largely drawn from Assoc Prof Litt’s PhD in the area of prevention. ‘My PhD was far too long [nearly 1000 pages] and dry, so hopefully the Green Book was something more readable for GPs and practice nurses. It is a cut-down guide,’ he said. ‘That second edition came out in 2006 and plans for a new edition are underway.’

This kind of effort, designed to help all patients and the broader healthcare system across Australia, has played a major role in Assoc Prof Litt winning a number of awards throughout his career, including this year’s Rose-Hunt Award, the highest accolade the RACGP bestows on any of its members (refer to breakout on page 8 for more information).

Jack of many trades
Assoc Prof Litt has an extensive education and academic background, having undertaken general practice training in Australia and overseas. He holds diplomas in obstetrics and gynaecology, a master’s degree in clinical epidemiology, and fellowships in general practice and public health medicine in addition to his PhD.

Assoc Prof Litt graduated from his medical studies at the University of Adelaide in 1978 and commenced general practice training in Australia. This was followed by more training in Canada, where he became a junior faculty member in the Department of Family Medicine at McMaster University in Ontario. ‘I enjoyed the training in public health that I did while working in the McMaster University Family Practice,’ he said. ‘It helped me to integrate my long-term interest in prevention with population health.’

Assoc Prof Litt later returned to Adelaide and joined Flinders University’s Discipline of Primary Care and Community Medicine (later the Department of General Practice) in 1987, where he remained until his retirement at the beginning of 2016.

‘My day job was the Associate Professor in General Practice and I was the General Practice Teaching Coordinator,’ he said. Assoc Prof Litt’s time as General Practice Teaching Coordinator allowed him the chance to further the educational opportunities for students involved in his chosen medical specialty.

‘That role meant ensuring that general practice, and the whole repertoire of associated skills, was visible in the curriculum,’ he said. ‘With the assistance of the Foundation Chair in Primary Care, Anthony Radford, and other GPs Deane Southgate, Andrew Ramsay, Geoff Stranks and Louis Pilotto, we managed to get a lot of things introduced [to the Flinders University curriculum].’

‘We are now talking to medical students about how to assess domestic violence, men’s health, high-level communication and counselling skills, and the value of continuity of care, especially when managing patients with complex care needs.’

Assoc Prof Litt’s contribution to the Flinders University Medical School was recognised in 2014 when he was awarded a Dean’s Award for outstanding service to the school over an extended period.

Working for the community
While much of his work falls under the umbrella of ‘prevention’, there are a number of specific areas in which Assoc Prof Litt has made major impacts on healthcare delivery.

“We are now talking to medical students about how to assess domestic violence, men’s health, high-level communication and counselling skills, and the value of continuity of care, especially when managing patients with complex care needs.’

Assoc Prof Litt’s contribution to the Flinders University Medical School was recognised in 2014 when he was awarded a Dean’s Award for outstanding service to the school over an extended period.

Working for the community
While much of his work falls under the umbrella of ‘prevention’, there are a number of specific areas in which Assoc Prof Litt has made major impacts on healthcare delivery.

It is very satisfying to know that some other people think that you have actually made a difference.”

In particular, his work has led to significant strides in immunisation, especially among people aged 65 and older.

‘Kids’ immunisation, quite legitimately, gets a lot of airtime, but adult diseases like influenza and pneumococcal and, more recently, shingles actually have a large burden of vaccine-preventable illness [VPIs],’ he said. ‘I conducted the first national influenza and pneumococcal survey in Australian about 16 years ago and followed that up about five years ago with the Australian Zoster Study.

‘Both surveys asked older patients and their GPs about their understanding of these conditions and what they thought about getting immunised.’

These efforts to increase immunisation among older people bore significant fruit in the early 1990s when Assoc Prof Litt and a public health colleague, Dr Peter Lake, helped to establish the South Australian Influenza Advisory Group following a flu scare. ‘We started that to try to promote better influenza vaccine uptake among at-risk groups,’ he said. ‘All of the bigger companies had encouraged their employees to get the flu vaccine and, as a consequence, a lot of older people and people with chronic illness missed out on getting it as there wasn’t enough available.

‘We got key stakeholders involved – pharmacists, public health people, practice nurses, nursing homes, local government – and discussed strategies to improve coverage.

‘In 1993, 29% of people older than 65 had a flu shot. In recent times, we have managed to get coverage levels of over 80%.

Assoc Prof Litt’s interest in counselling has also allowed him to offer his considerable expertise to help GPs in their daily practice.

‘There are two areas of counselling that have probably been most notable within the RACGP,’ he said.

‘They are motivational interviewing, in terms of providing skills for GPs and registrars to assist patients making health-related behaviour changes, and upskilling clinicians in assessing and managing domestic violence and patients who smoke.’

After attending an early workshop with the primary authors of the RACGP’s Abuse and violence: Working with our patients in general practice (White Book) – Dr Libby Hindmarsh and Prof Kelsey Hegarty – Assoc Prof Litt suggested the subject of bullying would be an appropriate addition.

‘Including a chapter on bullying was important because it is so pervasive in the community,’ he said. ‘Parents with children are well aware of cyber bullying and its consequences, but are not necessarily confident in how to tackle it.

“We thought it was really useful for GPs to know about bullying and be able to recognise when it is occurring in a range of settings, including within the family.

‘Delineating the boundary between the normal rough-and-tumble in a family and persistent bullying by either siblings or parents can be challenging. GPs have access to families and have an opportunity to have a look and see what’s happening when children present with a range of problems that may be related to bullying.’

Assoc Prof Litt has also served as Deputy Chair of the RACGP Expert Committee – Quality Care (REC–QC) (formerly the National Standing Committee on Quality Care) since 2000. This role has included working on a number of guidelines and position statements, particularly Guidelines for preventive activities in general practice (Red Book), which has just released its 9th edition. >>
Assoc Prof Litt believes guidelines such as these also present an important opportunity for GPs to assess the treatment areas that are not necessarily of benefit, or where the evidence suggests not implementing some aspects of prevention is a better course of action.

‘One of the chapters I instigated [in the Red Book] was on the indeterminate and unproven screening tests,’ he said.

‘Everyone wanted to know what works, but I think we’d all agree you also want to know what doesn’t work, or where the evidence is unclear. It can save the GP some time by not having to offer screening strategies that don’t improve the health and wellbeing of the patient.’

Self-reflection

Assoc Prof Litt understands the value of general practice research, having undertaken a considerable amount throughout his career.

‘I think there are still a lot of things in medicine that are not known,’ he said.

Assoc Prof Litt also believes in the power of healthcare professionals’ involvement in research, especially in asking questions about how they deliver care and what they could potentially be doing better.

‘Better quality of care requires that you have an understanding of the denominator in order to measure how well you are doing,’ he said. ‘GPs often report that they use best practice guidelines with all of their patients, but until we measure their performance using some objective criteria like patient surveys or clinical audit, we don’t really know how well they are doing.

‘Audit is a very simple way to do it. It’s not technically research, but it actually makes you think about asking a clinical question that is important. For example, am I doing well with my patients with diabetes? Do I have all of the kids in my practice up to date with vaccination?

‘So you have to reflect on what you are doing and I think that is an essential skill for all clinicians: to be able to ask themselves, am I doing this well? And do I have some objective evidence that I am doing it well?

‘Self-reflection is a core skill of a healthcare professional and audit is one way of assisting this process in a systematised way. I think it helps to renew the profession and encourages you to make sure you are doing the best you possibly can.’

Being named the Rose-Hunt Award winner for 2016 – the year of his retirement – has allowed Assoc Prof Litt an opportunity for a new level of self-reflection, one that encompasses an entire career.

‘I am really humbled and chuffed to receive the Rose-Hunt Award. It is very satisfying to know that some other people think that you have actually made a difference,’ he said.

‘When you retire you start to reflect on whether you have spent your time productively. It can be a challenging question to answer.’

‘To actually have someone say they think you have made a difference gives you a warm inner-glow. I have a real sense of privilege to have worked alongside many inspirational GPs like Mark Harris, Libby Hindmarsh and Kelsey Hegarty, not to mention the varied and dynamic chairs of the [REC–QC] and its predecessor, the Prevention and Community Medicine Committee, including Brian Kable, Barb Jones, Paul Mercer, Shiong Tan, Ron Tomlins and Evan Ackermann.

‘I look at the people who have received the Rose-Hunt Award in the past and I stand in awe and admiration. There have been many outstanding recipients and it is very gratifying to be able to be included in a group like that.’

The Rose-Hunt Award

The Rose-Hunt Award is the RACGP’s highest accolade.

The award was given to the RACGP from the UK’s Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP) in commemoration of two of the RCGP’s founding members, Dr Fraser Rose and Lord Hunt of Fawley (the first Honorary Secretary).

The Rose-Hunt Award is given to an RACGP Fellow or member who, in the opinion of Council, has rendered outstanding service in the promotion of the objects of the RACGP by individual patient care, organisation, education, research or any other means.

Outstanding service may be over a period of 10 years or a substantial and significant contribution to general practice over a shorter period.

The inaugural Rose-Hunt Award was presented to one of the RACGP’s founding fathers, Dr William Arnold Conolly, in October 1974.