

Obituary

George Montario Bedbrook Kt OBE OStJ MS(Melb) Hon MD(WA) Hon FRCS(Ed)
Hon DTech(Curtin) FRCS FRACS DPRM(Syd) Hon FCRM



George Montario Bedbrook was born on 8 November 1921 in Coburg, a suburb of Melbourne in Victoria. He was the younger of identical twin brothers, his elder brother the Reverend Frederick Bedbrook being a canon of the Anglican Church in Melbourne.

His father was an ex-serviceman in the Australian forces in the first world war having served for a period of 4 years overseas in Palestine, Gallipoli and France. Following his return to Australia at the end of the war he suffered from very poor health as a result of illness contracted during his war service and eventually died leaving his widow and 2 young sons aged 10 years.

The family home was a humble but loving one and they were regular members at the local Anglican church with both boys being members of the choir from an early age. The

family was supported by the Repatriation Department though the allowance they received was indeed a very small one. Both boys were educated at the University High School in Melbourne. Sir George went on to enter the Medical School of the University of Melbourne, achieving honours throughout his course of study and graduating MB, BS in 1944. He served as an RMO at the Royal Melbourne Hospital and followed this as a lecturer in anatomy at the University Medical School.

It was at this time that he supplemented his income as a lecturer by assisting the senior surgeons on the staff of Royal Melbourne Hospital and learnt a great deal from them. Whilst working in the wards there he first met his wife Jess and they were married in 1946.

By 1950 he had acquired a Master of Surgery degree and Fellowship of the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons. Post-graduate overseas experience was expected of young surgeons then as it is now. George and Jess arrived in England in 1951 with the first 2 of their children (3 more were to follow).

Appointments were held at the Royal National Orthopaedic Hospital and the Croydon Group of Hospitals with the FRCS of England being taken and passed in his first year in the United Kingdom. During this period his friendship commenced with JIP James of Edinburgh (later Professor), Ross Nicholson of New Zealand, Sir Henry (Nobby) Osmonde Clarke of the London Hospital and Oswestry, and Ivor Robertson of St Bartholemew's Hospital who stimulated his interests in orthopaedic surgery. It was at this time that he first encountered Sir Ludwig Guttman at Stoke Mandeville and his early exposure to the management of spinal injury at this world famous centre may well have had influence on his future professional work.

The family returned to Australia in 1953 with George Bedbrook being appointed to the Orthopaedic Department of Royal Perth Hospital and in private consultative practice with RD McKellar Hall, later president of the Australian Orthopaedic Association. It was in 1954 that he was asked to take over management of spinal injury patients and at that time there was no organised service as he soon discovered. This was to be the start of his concern for the spinal disabled which became the centre of the whole of his future professional life.

The first spinal injury centre in Australia commenced in Perth in 1954, based at the Royal Perth Rehabilitation Hospital. All spinal injury cases were directed to him and received excellent care despite the poor ward accommodation offered to him initially. His determination to offer these handicapped citizens a better life resulted in the development of a modern 40 bed purpose built spinal injury department which opened its doors in 1962 and it was from this unit that his greatest work was done in management of the acute care of spinal cord injury and the necessary rehabilitation that followed. He followed Sir Ludwig Guttmann's example of introducing sport as a means of rehabilitation and there followed the first Commonwealth Paraplegic Games in Perth in 1963 in recognition of which he was made an OBE.

He was director of the Spinal Cord Injury Unit from 1954 until 1972 when he was followed by Ellis Griffiths, remaining himself the senior surgeon to the unit until 1986 when he became emeritus. He was an excellent organiser and insisted upon detailed neurological assessment of his patients from the first hour following their admission to hospital. He established a sound nursing regime and eradicated chronic pressure sores and urinary infection. He gathered around him a group of dedicated specialists in the multidisciplinary care of the complications of spinal cord injury with an excellent research programme into pathological changes in the spinal cord being developed by his colleague Professor Byron Kakulas of the Neuropathology Department. Over the years he published over 117 scientific papers including 2 books

which he edited and which became standard reference works in many countries.

He served as president of the Australian Orthopaedic Association in 1977 having received the medal of honour (the Betts' Medal) in 1972. He was president of the International Medical Society of Paraplegia (1981/84) and he received the Society's medal in 1978.

His concern for his patients went beyond the hospital walls, into the development of the Paraplegic/Quadriplegic Association of Western Australia and later the Quadriplegic Centre for residence and employment of the disabled, which opened its doors in 1969. He was honorary medical officer to both these organisations taking a very keen interest in their development and offering a strong guiding hand when necessary. To those who came under his care he gave all his expertise, his wisdom and his humanity. He knew them all as individual persons with problems which they could discuss with him freely, all of which received his earnest consideration and all the help he could offer. His devotion to the cause of the disabled in the community was not confined to spinal cord injuries as he served as vice chairman (1975–83) of the National Advisory Council for the Handicapped, and as vice president (1970–80) of the Australian Council for Rehabilitation of the Disabled. He had a strong Christian faith and also served as a member of the Anglican diocese (1956–76).

In his last few years of semi retirement he was busily engaged in 2 projects, the Paraplegic Benefit Fund for those disabled and in need, and the Prevention of Spinal Cord Injuries Programme, with lecturers spreading the message of prevention throughout the state of Western Australia. The spinal unit at Royal Perth Rehabilitation Hospital was renamed in his honour as the Sir George Bedbrook Spinal Unit on his retirement from the staff of Royal Perth Hospital. He received many academic honours in his lifetime and was created a Knight Bachelor in 1978.

His academic training prior to 1954 prepared him for his life's work, the care and rehabilitation of the disabled in the community. He had a strong and forceful

personality, and was a natural leader who brooked no opposition in seeking nothing but the best for his patients. His unit became well known internationally, involving 65 young postgraduate physicians and surgeons from countries as far apart as USA, Israel, India, and Japan who benefited greatly from the period of study they undertook at the centre in Perth.

His wife, Jess, died in 1989 and after 43 years of marriage his loneliness was very apparent. His last year was one of ill health and he died peacefully on the 6th October 1991.

A service of thanksgiving for the life of George Montario Bedbrook was held at 2.30 pm on 10 October 1991 at St George's Anglican Cathedral in Perth. It was attended by the governor, state dignitaries and more than 500 of his friends including

more than 30 of his old patients in wheelchairs who came to pay their last respects to a great man.

He was a true pioneer and his impact on spinal injury care and rehabilitation not only in Australia but worldwide was indeed a very great one and set the pattern which others followed.

After many years of professional association and close friendship the writer will miss him greatly.

He is survived by 5 children and 15 grandchildren to whom we extend our deepest sympathy in their sad loss.

E R GRIFFITHS OBE

Emeritus and Consultant Orthopaedic Surgeon