

## Long and trail-blazing career at RCH

By **Andrew Court**

November 11, 2021 – 3.16pm

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**JOHN M. COURT** September 24, 1929- July 2, 2021

One of the last paediatric pioneers from the early days of the Melbourne Royal Children's Hospital, Dr John Court has died aged 91.

A man of seemingly limitless energy and drive, his commitment to developing health services for children and adolescents linked with a warm ability to connect to people led to many major developments in paediatric care. He was admired and respected by more than one generation of colleagues and patients.

He grew up in Melbourne and his early life was influenced by the advent of WWII when he was 10-year-old. His father was an accountant and had set up a successful toy business that with the declaration of war, was immediately taken over by the government leading to significant financial hardship. His mother was a professional musician and taught music to pay the school fees and John was then sent to Geelong Grammar as a boarder when he was 12 years old.

He described his years at GGS under the direction of the highly regarded educator and headmaster, Dr James Darling, as being happy and highly formative. He had decided to be a doctor at an early age and after graduating from the University of Melbourne in 1952 and completing his residency at RMH he had first wanted to train as a surgeon. This changed after crossing paths with two renowned paediatricians Dr Vernon Collins and Dr Howard Williams, after which he began a long and trail-blazing career at RCH.

Paediatrics was not an established discipline and there was no College of Paediatrics. He described these early days at RCH as an exciting adventure with the freedom to create and achieve things. He threw himself into both clinical work and research with early interests in respiratory disorders, childhood obesity and lipid disorders. He also set his mind on inventing things.

One of his early successes was to invent the first butterfly intravenous needle. Prior to this, intravenous access to babies and children was by cut-down onto veins with the

insertion of glass or metal catheters, a process that was clumsy and painful. His ingenious invention of a tiny needle attached to plastic “wings” and a flexible tube (on his own initiative he found a toy company to make it and a rug imported to sterilise it), was revolutionary.

Early on in his career he was asked by Dr Vernon Collins to take over the care of children with type 1 diabetes mellitus. He agreed, and over the following decades proceeded to develop the RCH diabetic service into one that was internationally recognised and respected. His innovative input was particularly focused on improving education and autonomy of patients and their families. He developed diabetic camps, promoted research, wrote textbooks and very popular books for parents.

When he first started at RCH, there was no health care concept of adolescence. Children were transitioned to adult hospitals when they turned 15. John believed this to be bad practice, particularly for his young diabetic patients who would then share medical waiting rooms with adult diabetics showing signs of long-term medical complications. He successfully lobbied for a change of transition age to 18, and this eventually became hospital policy for all patients. This led to his next career focus, the development of healthcare pathways for adolescents.

John saw that adolescents had their own specific health needs and decided to do something about it. He created the first adolescent medical ward in an Australian hospital, ensuring both an adolescent friendly environment and nursing staff with an interest in working with adolescents. He then set about creating a paradigm shift in the treatment of adolescents at RCH, changes that eventually led to the Centre of Adolescent Health and then the Department of Adolescent Health. He became internationally renowned in this area, was president of the Australian Association for Adolescent Health and council member of the International Association for Adolescent Health.

In addition to his roles at RCH, he was asked to oversee medical services at Geelong



Paediatric pioneer John Court

Grammar. He took on this role with characteristic enthusiasm and energy, travelling regularly to Geelong and also to the rural campus at Timbertop. He used this opportunity to develop many innovative health care pathways.

One of these was to develop a drug program to combat illicit drug taking that focused on education and rehabilitation as well as voluntary drug testing rather than expulsion. This was radical at the time and many students reported that the policy saved their lives. He continued his commitment to the school over three decades, continuing after his retirement from RCH into his early 80s. The school commemorated his input by naming a cafe in his honour at the Geelong campus.

In 1976, John was asked to take over editorship and responsibility for the *Australian Paediatric Journal*. Paediatrics was still a relatively new discipline, and the journal first established in 1965 was failing. As for all the many tasks he accepted, he took this on with gusto and made several decisions that were once again innovative at the time. He remained as editor (later editor-in-chief) for 25 years.

Following his retirement from RCH in 1994, he continued to work at GGS but also was an active member of the Medical Practitioners Board of Victoria. In this role, he chaired a committee responsible for “unwell doctors” that were deemed impaired in their ability to practice medicine. Typical of his character, rather than a focus on reproach or punishment, he recommended this be regarded as a health issue that required appropriate independent support and treatment. This then led to development of an independent health service, the Doctor’s Health Service whose philosophy was aligned with his longstanding views that health issues should be separated from disciplinary ones.

After retiring from public service, John set up in private practice. He helped many adolescent patients but developed a particular reputation for being able to engage difficult male adolescents. He was recognised by parents, colleagues and by the young people themselves as having the profound gift of being able to understand adolescents and change their lives for the better.

His professional life was rich and fulfilling, but he put the same passion and energy into all aspects of his life. He was very present for his family, having a long and successful marriage with Judy, who was well known for her own strong views and independent spirit. Their children Andrew, Jane and Madeleine remember him as being very present in their lives, bringing the same commitment and engagement to his family life that they recognised as him giving to his work. He spent weekends and evenings renovating their first homes, making wooden toys, cooking memorable Sunday meals and taking the family camping. When the family bought a farm property near Kyneton, all weekends were spent there together.

His other great interest was in water colour painting. He took this up in the middle of his life and attended weekly painting classes for many years. He painted many hundreds of paintings of nature, buildings and seascapes. They were much

appreciated by all who knew him, and many colleagues and friends have his paintings on their walls. He also found time to regularly attend classical concerts and the theatre with Judy, and to play royal tennis every week for many years until his deteriorating physical health made it impossible.

For many of the last years of his life he looked after Judy at home as she gradually succumbed to dementia. He continued however to spend as much time as he could with his five grandchildren, having his own particular and warm relationship with each one. He also wrote his memoirs which were published two years before he died, *“A Boy’s Life – the shaping of a medical pioneer”*.

In 1993, he was awarded the Order of Australia for services to paediatrics, to childhood diabetes, adolescent medicine and community services. He changed the landscape of paediatrics both locally and internationally, utilising his boundless energy to achieve radical and innovative treatment models and pathways of care. In particular, he will be remembered for his work in childhood diabetes and for his role in the development of adolescent medicine. But as another senior colleague noted after his death, these accomplishments could not possibly sum up his achievements – he was truly a “Renaissance man”.

His children Andrew Court, Jane Court and Madeleine Francis survive him.

**Dr Andrew Court is a consultant adolescent psychiatrist working at RCH and in private practice.**