

*a centenary of canberra's catholics*

# Medicine way of life for a man of faith

“Dr John Buckingham was one of the ACT’s most respected surgeons. Under his guidance, Calvary Hospital became a leader in breast-cancer surgery.

“John Buckingham has left a lasting clinical legacy in the way he treated his breast-cancer patients with dignity and compassion. He is also remembered as someone who supported his theatre staff in their professional development while regarding them warmly as people and friends.

“In the Australia Day 2012 Honours List, John Buckingham was posthumously appointed a Member of the Order of Australia in recognition of his services to medicine.”

Thus reads the inscription on the ACT Honour Walk into which John was inducted in May 2012. In 2010, the gentle self-effacing doctor was named ACT Senior Citizen of the Year in recognition of his outstanding service to medicine.

Just a month before John Buckingham’s death aged 63 on 29 March, 2011, Canberra Times journalist Sally Pryor wrote a major feature on Canberra’s much-loved surgeon.

“He pioneered the sentinel node mapping technique which enables diagnosis of lymph node involvement with breast cancer diagnosis.

“He was one of the first to show the value of CT scans in the early diagnosis of appendicitis both here and overseas.

“But he is best known in Canberra for the way he looks after his patients, involving himself in their care in the years after treatment.

“A life-long Catholic, he said he had always seen the way he practised medicine as integral to his faith.

“I think people wonder how I do what I do. I went into medicine because I felt that it’s not just being a doctor and diagnosing. It sounds corny, but I

**In the 19th in a series of portraits of significant Catholics of the national capital, Bishop Pat Power tells of one of our most highly respected surgeons**



John Buckingham with wife Sue, who shared his dedication to their patients.



believed in it. I think it’s a way of life, it’s looking after people and part of that is my faith,” he said.

“Born in Melbourne, he graduated in medicine and surgery from the University of Sydney in 1971 and went on to train in general surgery at the prestigious Mayo Clinic in America. He returned to

Australia and joined the staff of Canberra’s newly opened Calvary Hospital in 1979 and later became a specialist breast surgeon for the ACT region.”

David Buckingham, delivering the eulogy at his brother’s funeral, spoke of the way John’s religious beliefs informed everything he did.

“An enduring feature of John’s life was his faith. It ran deep. It gave him a strength and a clarity of view that was both abiding and ever present.

“John regarded the Church as an extension of his family. It was his community and when those in the Church talk of the ‘ecclesia’ as being the community of the faithful, John embraced that in every dimension.

“In his practice as a doctor, John was not only a good and competent and extraordinarily careful surgeon, he was also one who empathised and engaged with his patients in a way that ultimately saw them come to regard him in almost saintly terms.

“There was never too much that John could do for a patient – including his now famous ‘bosom buddies’ – but it was his ability to listen and to communicate in the simplest, most sensitive and totally honest way that his patients so deeply appreciated. He was a great doctor!”

His surgeon colleagues, Drs Michael Gillespie and Stephen Deane, wrote for the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons. “The development of a locally based graduate medical program, first as the Canberra Clinical School of the Faculty of Medicine, University of Sydney, and then later as the ANU Medical School allowed John to expand his interest in clinical teaching to students, and as the general surgical training program of RACS expanded, to registrar training as well.

“He excelled in his teaching role, and his elevation on retire-

ment to Clinical Associate Professor pleased him greatly.

“John was a strong contributor to the Australian and New Zealand Chapter of the American College of Surgeons (ACS). He served as chapter secretary for many years and, at the time of his death, was president of the chapter and a member of the board of governors of the ACS, representing fellows in Australia and New Zealand. He made particular contributions in establishing the annual American College of Surgeons lecture at the RACS annual scientific congress, the ANZ side of an exchange travelling scholarship between the RACS and the ACS, a travelling scholarship for RACS trainees to visit the annual ACS clinical congress, and the continuing financial security of the chapter.”

When John became aware of his pancreatic cancer diagnosis, he asked me to walk the final journey with him and Sue.

Sue was not only his devoted wife and mother of their four children, James, Peter, Kate and Michael, but an integral part of John’s medical practice, sharing the same outstanding dedication to their patients.

It was an inspiration for me to witness the mutuality of their love through which John and his family supported each other as they prepared for John’s death.

A great number of Catholic doctors have made outstanding contributions to the Canberra community in its 100 years history.

John Buckingham stands tall among them.



*Supporting parish initiatives*  
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