



VERNON DOUGLAS PLUECKHAHN

March 1921 – July 2019

Eulogy delivered by Stephen Cordner at Professor Plueckhahn's funeral on Friday 26 July, 2019, in Highton.

A self made man

It was the early experiences that shaped him - he became his own man and a self made man at that. This was the foundation of the wide range and significance of Vernon's very many achievements.

Vernon was born on 25 March 1921 and grew up on a farm of 2000 acres near Carlsruhe, 130 kilometres north of Adelaide. No electricity or power of course. There were uncles, aunts and cousins on at least three surrounding farms. Living together were his paternal grandfather Friedrich, father Ernst, mother Doris and his older sister Edna. And although young he had to contribute to the farm work. There are still Plueckhahns on those farms today by the way.

He travelled the 5 miles to the local school by bike or horse, winter and summer, rain and shine, 5 days a week. No reading or homework as a distraction, but focus on that goal of getting to school, or home. Each night there was 30 minutes of bible at the table before dinner from his grandfather, or, following his death when the regime softened, after dinner. When Vernon was eight years old, his father broke his spine after being badly butted by a ram resulting in him being flat on his back in bed for many weeks. He was subsequently not able to do the heavy work required to keep the farm going, so he moved his family to Adelaide obtaining work as a storeman. Vernon's brother Glen was born there in 1930, but a couple of years later his mother developed breast cancer and endured a 5 year illness, during the last year of which she was bed bound. Private nurses looked after her, but she was so unwell that Glen was not allowed to see her. Edna and Vern spent slabs of time with their aunt and uncle on one of the family farms – earning their keep. Doris died in 1937, just after Vernon finished his final year School Leaving exams. Ernst re-married within a matter of months – Constance Knight, one of Doris's nurses - upsetting Vern deeply.

Having just finished school, his father said that as he had supported him through school, it was time for him to leave home and look after himself. His sister by this time was a trainee nurse at the Royal Adelaide Hospital living in the nurses' quarters. His father and step mother returned to the country near Mt Pleasant where Ernst very successfully re-established himself as a dairy farmer. Vernon, now 17, must have felt quite alone.

By then, however, he already knew what he wanted to be - a doctor. But he simply could not afford to study full time. He enrolled part time in a science degree at the University of Adelaide, and started part time work as a trainee lab technician at what soon became the Institute of Medical and Veterinary Science. Many were the nights Vernon slept on couches in the staff room of the Lab such was the precarious nature of his accommodation arrangements. The work was as varied as it was demanding: he had to catch 50 macaque monkeys twice a day and take their rectal temperatures as part of polio research. On one occasion he was bitten and developed terrible cellulitis and septicemia (he was becoming unconscious). He was clearly in mortal danger and it is said that he became the first patient in SA to receive sulphonamide, the first antibiotic. When he recovered it was back to cleaning animal pens, bleeding draught horses (for horse blood agar plates), mincing bullock hearts for broth as culture media, bleeding smaller animals for Wasserman tests and washing – always washing in those pre-plastic days - the re-usable laboratory glassware. It was the early days of viral cultures using the chorio-amniotic membranes of fertilized hens eggs – he taught that technique to MacFarlane Burnet visiting the Institute from Melbourne.

Vernon was immediately made a Staff Sergeant (Pathology) when he enlisted in the army on 4 July 1941 at the age of 20. He joined the 2nd Army General Hospital on the Australian Hospital Ship the Wanganella which he boarded a week later in Melbourne. The Wanganella became his home for the next 4 years.

He ran its Pathology Laboratory single handedly. At the same time, the Wanganella covered more than 250000 nautical miles, repatriated more than 13,000 sick and injured soldiers, and crossed the equator 30 times calling in at such places as: Singapore, Aden, Suez, Colombo, New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Borneo, South Pacific, Italy (where they embarked NZ soldiers who they took to Wellington), Marseilles (where they swapped injured and sick prisoners with the Nazis), and Lisbon. While they were protected under international convention, the Wanganella was attacked twice but not hit. One other Australian Hospital Ship was sunk with the loss of 280 out of 330 on board; and another AHS was hit in Darwin Harbour with 12 deaths.

Vernon applied for and was granted discharge in early 1945 to enroll in Medicine at the University of Adelaide. In view of his background he did not have to do first year, reducing the course to five years. While his fees were paid by Commonwealth support for returned service men and he received an allowance of 4 pounds a week, he needed part time work to get by. He filled in for holidays and other vacancies at IMVS, and also demonstrated to his medical course colleagues in various of the science subjects. In the last couple of years of the course he really felt the pinch as he could not take the time away from studies to work.

He excelled, finishing third overall in final year and collecting 3 prizes along the way in Clinical Medicine, Obstetrics and Public Health. It was now the end of 1949 and he was 28. Over a journey which included the Great Depression, he had graduated at the top level of his medical course having fought for and earned every inch of the ground he had covered: a character forming journey which reinforced traits of persistence, hard work, service, and the overcoming of personal privations of various sorts.

A doctor first and a pathologist second

Vernon was always a doctor; he was about improving the lives of patients and people. Even as Director of Pathology at Geelong Hospital he and his medical colleagues always wore white coats to constantly remind themselves (and perhaps others) of this. At the end of 1951, aged 30, when he visited the Royal Melbourne Hospital, his goal was to become a specialist physician. While there he applied for and obtained a job in the Pathology Department run by Dr Doug Hicks who became one of his mentors. He saw this primarily as an opportunity to study for his Physicians exams – which he completed successfully.

So it was really not until 1953 when John Lindell gave him the opportunity to move to Geelong to start the Pathology Department there that he moved his sights away from clinical medicine – the direct care of patients - to a career as a pathologist. John Lindell was Director of Medical Services at the Royal Melbourne Hospital at the time of Vernon's appointment there so would almost certainly have known of his background experience. Lindell himself was a late starter in medicine, and had also been in the military. Together with Vernon's performance while at the Melbourne the good fit with Geelong was clearly apparent to Lindell. Coming as it did at the time of his marriage, and appealing to Vernon's likely ambition to take a leadership role, he took it on. But his life subsequently in pathology was entirely connected to patients. It was for patients that he wanted to run a fantastic department. There is no better example of this than the hexachlorophene story.

Hexachlorophene was the disinfectant used to manage neonatal staphylococcal infection – the cross infection of new borns in hospital with staphylococcus – from mothers to babies, from nurses to babies, from babies to mothers, from babies to nurses: a perfect storm and a major hospital problem in the 1950's. Vernon led a 20 year program of research - partnering with Joan Banks, his department's highly regarded microbiologist and with no other research support - to understand the cross infection, its consequences, how it could be prevented, the proper role in that of hexachlorophene and, latterly, whether hexachlorophene was causing any harm to the babies. The research involved double blind controlled techniques well before these were common place. It was also the subject of his successful 1960 MD by thesis at the University of Adelaide. Publications on this were translated and published in Portuguese and Spanish and were preludes to visits to San Salvador and Brazil.

An invitation to visit and present to the US FDA meant that he was the world authority on the subject of hexachlorophene and newborns. His work was based on microbiology and clinical data from no fewer than 80,000 babies, and in its later phases the outcomes of over 800 neonatal and paediatric autopsies from Geelong, Royal Womens and Royal Childrens Hospitals. These showed that in no case was there any histologically detectable problems in the brains of babies washed in hexachlorophene.

This work required all his attributes – attention to detail; persistence; and thoroughness. All of this work helped safeguard the health of millions of babies and mothers world wide. And furthermore it showed that at heart he viewed his place in pathology as where he could best look after the welfare of patients and people. This was work of the highest caliber and significance. As if it was not enough, at the same time he was leading a growing pathology department, serving the AMA (Victorian Branch) including as President, serving two years as the Director of Medical Services at Geelong Hospital, serving as State Councillor, Federal Councillor and President of the Royal College of Pathologists of Australasia and giving the time to be part of a happy family; and he was building extensive experience and doing original research in forensic pathology.

A passion for justice

It was an accident that Vern became a forensic pathologist. He was not aware until late in the piece when accepting the offer to move to Geelong that the hospital mortuary was actually a coronial mortuary. It had been built in 1927 by the Law Department and leased in perpetuity to the hospital for its own purposes on the basis that the hospital undertook the coronial autopsies. He was now responsible for that work. First, he had to make himself into a forensic pathologist. It was the nature of the specialty then that no training was available. So he taught himself. In his case he had an in-built advantage of high intelligence and an enquiring mind, he was armed with a fantastic background in medicine and pathology generally and over the years was exposed to thousands of cases. He gave himself an excellent training!! By the 1970's he was regarded Australia's leading forensic pathologist. So said Frank Galbally in his autobiography 'Galbally for the defence'. But also The Hon John Coldrey QC, previously the Director of Public Prosecutions and a Supreme Court Judge:

"Vern Pluekhahn was a truly remarkable man who was a pioneering giant in the field of forensic pathology. I was one of many young criminal barristers who regarded his "Green Book" as the bible of forensic medicine! Indeed we would religiously consult it as we grappled with our cases."

Some key highlights of his forensic pathology work include

- The Second Royal Commission into the Voyager Disaster – the collision in February 1964 between the aircraft carrier HMAS Melbourne and the destroyer HMAS Voyager, the Navy's greatest peace time disaster. There was great unhappiness at the outcome of the first Royal Commission. His research, and evidence to the Royal Commission on the generation of alcohol levels in blood specimens which did not have preservative added to them formed the basis of the exoneration of the skipper of the Voyager, Duncan Stephens, from the allegation that he was drunk while in charge of the Voyager at the time of the collision. (The second Royal Commission did find that Stevens was unfit to command for medical reasons).
- Two deaths in a vaccination programme. Two deaths in the 1960's from a group of 206 people in a work based influenza vaccination program as a result of the use of multi dose vials with disposable needles manually changed after each injection. Vernon's investigation, again with Joan Banks, led to the banning of multi dose syringes in Australian vaccinations. This was an early example of forensic or coronial pathology being used for public health purposes.

- Another such example was his research in alcohol and drowning – and boating. How often it was that people, usually men, drowned while swimming or boating.
- Splatt. There is simply not the space to go into this – suffice to say that his evidence into the Royal Commission into Spalitt's conviction for murder in South Australia led to a complete overhaul of the practice of Forensic Science in that state with flow on effects nationally.
- Chamberlain. If one asks an audience of medical students these days who has heard of the Chamberlain case, most shake their head!! Back in the day, Vernon – and even his wife Ann and their children – wore the anger people had for them because of his support of Lindy Chamberlain. “How dare you protect a murderer” they said – and he got death threats as well. Nine week old Lindy Chamberlain disappeared in August 1980 while camping with her parents Lindy and Michael and their two other children at Uluru. Azaria was put down to sleep in a tent at around 8pm. A short time later Michael and another camper heard a cry from the tent – Lindy hurried back whereupon she was heard to cry out: “My god, My god, A dingo has got my baby”. An immediate and ongoing search failed to find any sign of the baby. A week later her clothing, but not Azaria's matinee jacket, was found near a dingo's lair at the base of Uluru about 4 K from the campsite. Despite the initial inquest finding that indeed a dingo took Azaria, Lindy was eventually charged with and convicted of her murder in October 1982. Along the way she became the most vilified woman in Australian history. She was convicted on flawed scientific evidence – stains in the Chamberlain's car said to be blood, and baby's blood at that; blood said to be on a pair of scissors in the car; Professor Cameron from London's evidence, based on examining Azaria's jump suit, that Azaria's throat had been cut; damage to the baby's clothing found at the base of Uluru could not have been caused by dingo's teeth but by the scissors.

Vern was giving general scientific advice to the defence and specific evidence countering that of Cameron's. He was deeply upset by her conviction and offered his ongoing services pro bono. He correctly predicted that if the matinee jacket was found it would deal with many of Cameron's false assertions. The jacket was indeed found in Feb 1986 and within a week the NT Govt was forced to release Lindy – this was but the beginning of a long road before Lindy's innocence was formally established and recognized by the law, a journey lengthened by the Northern Territory government. Vern was deeply immersed in this case for 4 years – he deeply believed in the justice of his cause and at considerable personal cost was on the right side of a massive wrong conviction.

Leadership

Vernon was a living, walking daily master class in medical leadership. Leadership has so many facets it is sometimes difficult to pinpoint what makes specific people leaders. But in Vern's case it is quite easy. He was also a builder of institutions; not surprisingly therefore, he was also, to use the Australian vernacular, a bloody good organizer.

He could command – tell people to do things – but this was against a background of having got those people to the point where they were willing to do it; they understood it, and this is the trick, they wanted to do it - , because it was needed, and because it was for him. He also knew how to wield whatever power he had to achieve his ends.

All of this overlaps with organizing. While at school in Adelaide as an early teenager, he got a part time job delivering letters for an agricultural company – many of the letters were to other agricultural companies all of whom had their own boys on bicycles delivering letters, many of which likewise were to other agricultural companies. Vern gathered all the boys together, arranged for them all to meet at an agreed time and place, and delivered all their letters to each other, then they all went off for a bun and milkshake, instead of riding to every corner of the city!

At Geelong Hospital he ran the Pathology Department, which grew over the time of his stewardship from 5 to 90 staff, from a shed and mortuary to spacious, purpose built, contemporary laboratory and academic space. During his time, the department was physically and intellectually at the core of the hospital which itself greatly expanded at the same time. Symbolic of this was the fact that the hospital lecture theatre was within his department. At the same time, for 2 years, he also ran the hospital as Director of Medical Services. The people he relied on for advice included Dr John Perry at the Royal Children's Hospital, Dr Doug Hicks at the Royal Melbourne Hospital and Dr John Tonge in Brisbane. Every Monday morning, first thing, Vernon would do a tour of inspection of his domain, a moment of anxiety for many, an opportunity first hand for him to see what was happening and talk briefly to his staff.

It was clear to those who worked with him that Vernon had a particularly strong relationship with his technical staff which was reciprocated. Vernon's ability to attract and identify good staff, who he then backed and did not micromanage, a trait of most good leaders, is clear.

He was innovative: he started a bone bank; the department's blood bank was the first in Victoria to store blood for autologous transfusion and introduced fractionation before the Melbourne Red Cross Blood Bank; developed new techniques for cutting sections of non-decalcified bone to evaluate osteoporosis and osteomalacia; he developed a cytology service (the first in provincial Victoria); his departmental library outshone the hospital library (Vernon was perhaps also competitive!); and he developed a wonderful pathology museum which survives even today at Deakin University. He led Geelong Hospital in to the use of computers well ahead of most other hospitals, convincing the hospital to buy a large mainframe computer requiring a purpose built facility to house it in his department.

He oversaw two major re-builds of his department (1965 and 1972) and was central to a major hospital building development which opened in 1969. By 1972, a little over half way through his tenure as Director of Pathology at Geelong Hospital, his department was reporting on over 300,000 pathology tests to the hospital and to more than 200 doctors in private practice. By 1985, a year before he retired, in terms of volume of its diagnostic service, Vernon's department was the third largest in the state.

His brainchild: The VIFM

While it was of course a team effort involving other key individuals, notably The Hon John Phillips AC QC, Professor Graeme Schofield and Dr Gad Trevaks AO – all great leaders in their own domains – in relation to the bringing of VIFM into existence, Vernon was the leader. He recognized what needed to be done and then set about doing something about it, bringing everyone along with him. For 5 years from the early 1970's, Vernon knocked on doors, worked the phones, wrote letters, had meetings, convinced people of the need, plotted a course that could be followed. He was rewarded when in 1975, the government established a Coroners Court Review Committee which Vernon was on of course. Reading it now, you can recognize him as the main author of the Committee's damning report, using words to the effect that the facilities at the then Melbourne Coroners Court and mortuary were a disgrace to the State of Victoria. Then followed design committees, building committees, liaison with Monash University, the Health Department, funeral directors, the Bar Association and so on and so forth.

He used all his wiles. When he met John Phillips, the Chamberlains' barrister, John very soon and very willingly became heavily involved. They forged a wonderful partnership. John subsequently became DPP and he helped get new Attorney General Jim Kennan on board. Vernon and Jim Kennan got on like a house on fire – they were both Geelong supporters!

Later on Kennan described his role in delivering the Institute as feeling a bit like the full forward alone in the goal square being delivered the ball by all the hard work upfield, Vernon handballing to him and all he had to do was put it thru from the goal line.

Every thing he tackled was a campaign – planned, prepared and executed. Hurdles and blockages simply became mini campaigns. Nobody, he used to say, can defeat persistence.

Stephen Cordner, the VIFM's inaugural Director, has publicly said that he had the fruits of all of Vernon's work handed to him on a plate. There was also the additional benefit of having Vernon (having now retired from Geelong Hospital) in the Institute providing one on one daily tutorials and practical demonstrations on how to go about making an Institute fly. Stephen was 35 – Vernon was 65 – and while Stephen said he knew a bit of forensic pathology he knew zip about anything else.

“Write the annual report; develop these manuals; have you done the Council minutes; we need an ethics committee; organize this dinner; did you write a thank you letter for the dinner we had last night at Monash; have you written to the Secretary of the Justice Department with your summary of the outcome of our meeting yesterday? Get computerized; employ Vicky Winship!; get out and meet people; make VIFM a place where people meet; get the country pathologists in here once a month for a meeting; have you made a link with the Alfred Hospital Trauma Centre; make people feel good about VIFM; make VIFM relevant; keep people informed; if you can do it quickly, do it now! Don't let small jobs accumulate. And don't just talk about it – DO! ACT! If you make a mistake, correct it”

This is how it was week after week, month after month for the first six years of the Institute's life.

Stephen and Vernon worked fantastically together – it all gelled. More than once Vernon brought him up short – but in private – when he seriously disagreed. But Vernon never, as Stephen says, failed to fully support publicly everything Stephen did – thus sticking to an undertaking given to this effect very early on in their partnership.

Values

Vernon was a man of his word. Integrity, loyalty, truthfulness, a strong sense of justice – he lived these values. In his various lectures and writings he identified qualities such as these as the reason some doctors were also professionals – they were not professionals purely because they were doctors. Such values are not only what make people professionals, they are necessary for the proper practice of medicine. These qualities are not inherent in people, nor are they inherently religious ideas, but they do need to be identified and adopted by people.

Where did this sort of thinking come from? His Lutheran upbringing; the Bible read at the dinner table each night while he was growing up and kept by his bed and read every night as an adult. But he was not a churchgoer.

This was also part of the backdrop for his first text book: Ethics, Medical Law and Forensic Pathology. The only material on ethics at the time really was medical etiquette. Then, serendipitously, Vernon got together with Kerry Breen, sometime President of the Medical Board of Victoria, Medical Board of Australia and later Chair of the Australian Health Ethics Committee. Together with Stephen Cordner (and later Colin Thomson) this eventually led to the production of 4 editions of what is now entitled: Good Medical Practice – Medical Professionalism, Ethics and Law. The future of the book has been taken over by the Australian Medical Council which oversees medical education in Australia. You can just make out a hologram of Vern hovering in the professional space around doctors practising in Australia.

Medical politics

It is inevitable that leaders have to politick. At medical school, with David Kirby, who was also a returned serviceman, 5 years older than Vernon and who became a life long friend, they were representing the Medical Students' Association at the Student Representative Council. The medical students wanted to be able to amend their own constitution without requiring the approval of the SRC – effectively they wanted independence! The SRC was not happy – Vern and David led the group of medical students out, thus leaving the SRC – a UDI !!

It was a minefield in the 1970's when he was on the Council of the Royal College of Pathologists of Australasia (a college he had helped to found) as Victoria's representative. He was President from 1977-79. Medibank as payer was relatively new, and some pathologists and doctors were abusing it – paying kickbacks to General Practitioners for directing patients to them and over servicing patients.

There were no rules about who could do testing and large auto-analysers were just coming in. It was later acknowledged by Government that the College was ahead of the game in getting the government sensitized to the issues. The issues were at heart ethical and the government's initial response was that there was no role for government in medical ethics. Vernon helped to dissuade them of that, and his views trying to help control avarice cost him personally – there was some vociferous opposition - and delayed his accession to the Presidency of the College by 2 years.

He was on the Council of the Victorian Branch of the Australian Medical Association from 1959 – 70, serving as President in 1968. The issue of abortion was still very much on the agenda, the Menhennit case having been decided in 1967.

His early close relationship with John Lindell gave him valuable early insights into dealings with government. He would often upset the hospital by going around them directly to the Department of Health. He would have used that to good effect without overdoing it.

Education

Vernon's great grandfather Caspar, who arrived in Adelaide from northern Germany in 1848 at the age of 35, had no formal education. His was the first generation in that part of the world born out of serfdom, courtesy of Napoleon Bonaparte's victories in Europe in the early 19th century.

His grandfather Friedrich had primary education and maybe some secondary education. His father Ernst was educated to primary school level. As we have heard Vernon clearly understood the importance of education for himself. Throughout his working life he supported technical education at every opportunity. One year the Geelong Hospital annual report proudly announced that in the previous year it had trained more laboratory technical staff than any other hospital in Victoria – including the much bigger hospitals in Victoria. This was clearly all Vernon's doing. He was proudly on the board of the Gordon Institute – Geelong's technical education institution - for very many years. While Director of Medical Services at Geelong Hospital he laid the ground work for the later reception of medical students at the hospital, and for the rotation of registrars from the Melbourne Hospitals. For years he taught forensic medicine in the 5th year of the Melbourne University medical course, producing his famous lectures on forensic medicine manual which formed the basis of the text book mentioned above.

His very first publication – in the Medical Journal of Australia in 1952, in Vernon's third post graduate year - was entitled "Medical Education". Kerry Breen, Vern's biographer, regards this as an 'outstanding contribution'. The key ideas were that medical specialization was fragmenting a broader medical education; 3 years preclinical and 3 years clinical education got in the way of a necessary more integrated approach; the current model was producing doctors who would sooner be taught than learn; there was insufficient emphasis on producing doctors imbued with a sense of giving rather than a sense of entitlement; more needed to be done to develop character. These features are all now part of contemporary Australian medical education, being progressively adopted from the 1970's in existing medical schools, and earlier in the newer schools. Vernon was probably exposed to these ideas from visiting academics especially from the United Kingdom.

Influences

The person who had the strongest most enduring impact on Vern was Ann Roark, who became his wife. What a story. They were engaged 6 weeks after first meeting in late 1952. She was working in the blood bank above the pathology department at RMH where he was working. He was 31, she was 20. They married later in 1953, on 8 December, at Trinity College Parkville where Vernon was living. The reception was at 9 Darling St South Yarra, the Melbourne society wedding venue. Deeply in love then, so they were until the end. Along the way they had four children: Debra, Sally, David and Richard who all recall a wonderfully happy childhood. Ann died in 2012, and although Vern was already somewhat ill then, it was a huge blow from which he never recovered.

There was no member of the staff of the Geelong Hospital who was invited overseas, known overseas, welcomed overseas for their knowledge and experience in the way Vernon was. As Kerry Breen has written: "That a young pathologist in what was then a relatively small hospital in a city of 80,000 could become such a well known and respected international expert is truly remarkable." As a gloss on that, he did this in more than one domain: Staphylococcal infection in neonates and mothers, forensic pathology and leadership and administration in pathology – including forensic pathology. Nationally his work in ethics continues to contribute strongly.

He was without doubt a great man.

Post script: This eulogy could not have been written without detailed reference to Prof Kerry Breen's biography of Vernon: A Passion for Justice - The life and times of Vernon Plueckhahn. It has been published by Australian Scholarly Publishing. Copies are available at: enquiry@scholarly.info or www.scholarly.info