

OBITUARY
HARRY GEORGE WATTS
19 APRIL 1929 – 12 FEBRUARY 2022
UROLOGIST

Harry (Heinz), the only child of Oscar and Hilda Wachs, was born in Vienna, Austria, in 1929. His father, of Jewish faith, was an accountant at Creditanstalt, a government bank, and his mother worked in the family shop prior to their marriage. In 1938, on a background of years of intermittent and increasing violence towards Jews, the family decided to emigrate. Through the good fortune of having a friendly relationship with a German officer, the family were able to obtain tourist visas and make their way to Aotearoa New Zealand, settling in Auckland. None of their relatives who remained in Austria survived the war. After a few years the family became naturalised Aotearoa New Zealand citizens, changing the family name from Wachs to Watts and Heinz to Harry.

Harry, now 10, commenced school in Aotearoa New Zealand, at Wellesley Street Primary School. Along with many other immigrant children, Harry could not speak English when he arrived but was a very capable student and went on to Mount Albert Grammar in 1943. There he excelled academically while playing a lot of sport, particularly football (soccer). In 1947, unsure about what to do after leaving school, he decided to do the medical intermediate course as an entry point into medical, dental, veterinary or agricultural science courses. At this time there were many returning servicemen who were given priority, but, as Harry had excelled, he gained entry to medicine at Otago University.

In Dunedin, Harry started off boarding, but soon went flatting with two former servicemen, both hardened campaigners, and another school leaver. During this period, as Coronet Peak gained recognition, Harry began skiing, a passion he continued to pursue into his 80s. Student life provided some great times and long-lasting friendships. Summer university vacations were spent working in woolstores or the freezing works in Auckland. During his sixth year Harry worked as a relieving house surgeon at Auckland Hospital, receiving £250 for his efforts and he was awarded his MBChB in 1952.

Harry obtained further experience as a house surgeon at Waikato Hospital, Hamilton, where he worked for the next two years. During this time he met Beverley Munro, a theatre nurse, and they subsequently married. Pursuing a surgical career, he obtained a registrar position at Palmerston North in 1955. In May the next year Harry and Beverley travelled to the United Kingdom where he worked as a surgical registrar in Rochdale. This led to his gaining his Edinburgh Fellowship in January 1957. At the end of that year he obtained a position in the urology unit at Preston Hospital. With the arrival of two children, Sheryl and David, this was a busy time.

After nearly four years in the UK, Harry made his way back to Aotearoa New Zealand in May 1959 obtaining a position as sole general surgeon at Thames Hospital. He had a goal to run his own surgical service by the time he was 30, but missed it by a month. Harry successfully completed his FRACS in 1960 and the following year he accepted an appointment at Tauranga Hospital as general surgeon and Acting Medical Superintendent. In 1967 he secured a position in the Urology Research Unit at Prince Henry Hospital in Sydney, returning to Tauranga the following year to take up the newly created position of urology, a position he held until his retirement in 1998.

Harry's extensive general surgical experience stood him in good stead as most Urological surgery at that time was open. But being innovative, and a regular participant in international scientific meetings, Harry was always quick to take on new technologies and techniques, building the foundations of what was to become a small but internationally recognised urology unit. For example, he was one of the first to carry out continent diversion cystectomy in Aotearoa New Zealand; he introduced ultrasound as an everyday tool; adopted endoscopic cameras; developed the subspecialty of paediatric urology in Tauranga; and established one of the first 'impotence clinics' in his private practice.

In 1986 Harry was joined by Dr Mark Fraundorfer, who had been first introduced to Urology as Harry's house surgeon. In that year Harry co-convoked the Annual Scientific Meeting of the Urological Society of Australasia, held in Rotorua. In 1991 Professor Peter Gilling joined the unit and Tauranga became accredited for an advanced training post. In the latter years of his career Harry remained a strong advocate for innovation such as co-establishing a public/private partnership, Venturo Limited. This became the first surgical service to offer clinic appointments within two months of receipt of referral and surgery within six months of the decision to treat, along with the use of private facilities if they proved more cost-effective. It also allowed an innovative approach to technology, with sharing between public and private; all arrangements that are slowly becoming the norm in the public sector. During this time the Tauranga unit invented the procedure of holmium laser enucleation of the prostate with morcellation and carried out many first-in-Aotearoa New Zealand procedures.

In addition to his clinical contributions, Harry was also an astute businessman. He co-founded a surgical equipment and supply distribution company which remains a major player in Aotearoa New Zealand today. With his son, Dave, he owned a dairy farm and many other businesses, but always lived a modest and unassuming lifestyle.

The early 1980s were a sad period for Harry as he lost both parents. Bev developed cancer and died following a few years of illness and, tragically his much loved daughter, Sheryl, was killed in a car accident. During this time, Harry continued to focus on and enjoy his work, which he said kept him sane. With a love of sailing and, having participated in the Sydney Hobart Yacht Race in 1971-72, he threw himself into the challenge of fitting out a yacht, having bought the hull and decks of a 9.2 metre Lotus. Nephron was launched in 1985 and Harry spent many happy days sailing her. He was an accomplished blue water yachtsman and made multiple trips up into the South Pacific islands with a close-knit group of sailing mates.

In 1992 Harry found a new partner and soulmate in Jude Gunn and they married in 1996. Harry retired from all aspects of surgical practice two years later. Owning a holiday house on the Tongariro River at Tūrangi, Harry continued skiing nearby Mt Ruapehu into his eighties. He was a passionate and skilled trout fly fisherman, a recreation he was able to pursue until the last year of his life. Reading and wood turning were two other regular activities. With Jude he enjoyed tramping, boating and extensive overseas travel.

After a brief illness Harry passed away peacefully on 12 February 2022 in Tauranga Hospital, where he had spent most of his working life performing and teaching surgery, while treating thousands of patients with skill and compassion. Sadly for his family, numerous friends, colleagues and former patients there was no funeral because of COVID-19 restrictions.

Harry is greatly missed by his wife, Jade, son, David, two grandchildren and three great great grandchildren.

Dr Allan Panting FRACS