

OBITUARY
ROBERT FLAXLEY MULLIGAN
9 FEBRUARY 1917 – 27 JANUARY 2022
GENERAL SURGEON

Robert (Bob) Mulligan was born in 1917, the second son of William Henry Mulligan and Mignonette Coles, and brother of Felix. The family farmed at "Flaxmere", Maronan, a typical large Canterbury plains sheep and cropping farm west of Ashburton. In 1924, when their father became unwell, the family moved to Auckland and Bob commenced at Belmont Primary School. With his father recovering better health the family returned to Flaxmere in 1929 and Bob and Felix became boarders at Timaru Boys High School. There cricket was his passion, and he won a place in the first eleven in his last year at school.

After four years at high school, interspersed with holidays working on the farm, Bob was told by his father he would not be returning to school as it was expected that he would work on the farm. Spending the next year working at Flaxmere, Bob's lack of enthusiasm apparently convinced his parents that he was not destined for a farming career and, as a compromise, in 1935 he commenced a Bachelor of Agriculture degree at Canterbury University. Sharing physics, chemistry and biology with others completing their medical intermediate year, the seeds of a medical career were sown. At the year's end he passed chemistry and biology but missed physics, so the following year he repeated physics and took Latin with a private tutor (it being a requirement for entry to Medical School and he had not taken this at high school). Passing in both subjects he gained entry to Otago Medical School in Dunedin.

Commencing his medical training in 1937, Bob spent his first three years at Selwyn College and thrived on anatomy and physiology. While teaching in the latter years was somewhat limited, due to the effect of WW2 on staffing, Bob successfully completed his four years at Medical School. He spent his final year in Dunedin in a flat at the top of Cargill Street with Charles Morkane, who had a car which greatly assisted the increasingly enjoyed Wednesday afternoon golf at the Balmacewen Golf Course. In 1941, at the beginning of sixth year, all final year medical students without temporary medical posts were sent to Burnham Military Camp for military training, so Bob found himself doing basic infantry drills and route marches. At this stage of the war all medical students were "manpowered" and expected to continue their training or subsequent hospital employment until called up in groups every six months for military service. Sixth year was spent between Auckland and Hamilton hospitals working as an acting house surgeon, filling in for those called into military service and there was little specific teaching.

Two years were spent in rotating house surgeon roles in Waikato before early in 1944 Bob was called to serve as a medical officer in the Air Force. With the rank Flight Lieutenant, he was posted successively to bases at New Plymouth, Auckland, Woodbourne, Wigram, Ardmore and finally Lauthala Bay in Fiji. There Bob met Jean Guthrie, a nurse at Suva Hospital, and following their release from military service several months after the ending of WW2, they returned to New Zealand and married in 1946. After two years languishing in the Air Force completing medical boards and general practitioner type work for airmen and WAAF's Bob obtained a surgical run for a few months back at Waikato Hospital.

Although determined to follow a surgical career, plans to travel to England had to be placed on hold when Jean became pregnant. Consequently, Bob worked for a year as a medical officer at Te Kopuru Hospital serving the Dargaville region in Northland. He enjoyed this part

of the country, and Whangarei with its subtropical climate and wonderful coastline for watersports was to prove an attraction. Early in 1948 with daughter, Jane, the family set sail for Edinburgh where Bob attended the surgical course in preparation for the Fellowship examination. A six-month house surgeon position at Hillingdon Hospital in London was followed by numerous locum positions in London hospitals over the next eighteen months, during which the London Primary FRCS examination was completed and FRCS(Ed) secured. The family increased with the arrival of a son, Bruce.

Late in 1950, after almost three years in the UK, Bob was unexpectedly advised of a position as Assistant Superintendent at the Whangarei Hospital, but this required an early start. Consequently, Bob returned independently as a ship's doctor leaving Jean the onerous task packing up and bringing home two small children on a separate ship. The full-time position with almost continuous 'on-call' duties included the provision of a hospital house. Some months later Charles Bliss, also a surgeon, was appointed as Superintendent, enabling sharing of emergency and routine surgery. Medical care and anaesthesia were provided by local general practitioners. Bob was the true general surgeon, expected to cope with a wide range of surgery including tonsillectomies, caesarian sections, urology, gynaecology, craniotomies and trauma of all forms besides every aspect of general surgery.

During the next few years there was considerable development of Northland health services with the centralising of the work of the six regional hospitals at Whangarei Base Hospital and the employment of a specialist physician, an orthopaedic and ENT surgeon, a radiologist and a pathologist. In 1958 Bob was appointed to a part-time position and the family, with the addition of Kerry and Nicholas, moved to a nearby 10-acre property with a large Kauri villa. Private surgery was provided at the newly built Onerahi Hospital. In 1961 Bob successfully completed the FRACS examination.

Bill Sugrue described Bob as having a lovely disposition, retaining elements of formality in his role as surgeon – on being called to acute cases in the middle of the night he always arrived dressed in a shirt and tie with a jacket. While not having a major leadership role, but with a vision for the future, his kindly personality and the respect he was accorded, Bob was instrumental in attracting skilled specialist staff essential to the development of health care in the Whangarei Base Hospital. A term was served as Chairman of the Northland branch of the New Zealand Medical Association.

Bob retired from surgical practice in 1979 to develop a kiwifruit orchard with his eldest son, Bruce. Golf remained a major activity throughout Bob's life, and he was still playing regularly at the age of 97 years. After settling in Whangarei, a holiday house was obtained in Whangaroa and many family holidays were spent there, either on or in the water or tramping. Sailing became an increasingly important activity along with overseas travel and reading.

Following Jean's death at 90 years in 2009, Bob continued to live independently at Selwyn Park Village participating in indoor bowls and regularly attending U3A and Probus. When he died at the age of 104 years Bob was the oldest surgeon in New Zealand. Robert Mulligan was the beloved husband of Jean, father of Jane, Bruce, Nick and the late Kerry, grandfather of 10 grandchildren and 13 great grandchildren.

This obituary is based upon "Bob Mulligan – A Life" by Bob Mulligan, with contributions from Bill Sugrue FRACS, Bruce Mulligan and family.

Dr Allan Panting FRACS