

OBITUARY
JOHN CAMPBELL GILLMAN
5 JULY 1924 – 28 SEPTEMBER 2021
GENERAL SURGEON

John Gillman, a passionate surgeon and vigneron, was the son of Frank and Irene Gillman (née Clarke). Born in Onehunga, Auckland, he grew up alongside his three sisters, May, Shirley, and Yvonne, and attended Onehunga Primary School where he excelled in English. High school years were spent at Auckland Grammar School where he was a good hockey player. Learning to play the violin well, he became a member of the Auckland Junior Orchestra.

Although the family had a thriving box carton business, John's strong desire to pursue medicine was recognised and encouraged. His early role-model in medicine was his family GP – even after a tonsillectomy on the kitchen table! When he applied for a grant to attend medical school his family insisted on funding him instead, although he also paid for some of his fees by working at the Penrose Meat Works (a confronting education in anatomy and brute surgical skills).

John completed his medical intermediate year at Auckland University and gained entry to Otago Medical School, residing at Knox College. During his time, he was awarded a university blue for outdoor rifle shooting. Completion of his medical degree in 1948 was proudly announced to his family in a telegram: "Just call me Doc". Afterwards, he spent a year working as a GP in Epsom with Fred Moody and then served as a house surgeon in Hamilton before returning to Auckland. By then he had decided to become a surgeon.

At the age of 26 years, he sailed to the UK as ship's surgeon to train in surgery, working at King Alfred, Greenwich, The Archway, and Great Northern hospitals. Spending the final six months in Hampstead Heath, he shared a space in the classic flat combination – an Englishman, an Irishman and two fellow Kiwis. At a party he met Peggy Middleton (an advertising agency assistant) of Fulham, London and despite the handicap of being a colonial, he obviously impressed her. When he returned to Aotearoa New Zealand, again as ship's surgeon, she followed him.

In 1957, John commenced as senior surgical tutor at Auckland Hospital and subsequently became a Paediatric Surgery consultant. Gaining his FRACS in 1960, he later worked at Middlemore Hospital, eventually securing a general surgical appointment. In 1961 John and Peggy married and they had four children. John began part-time private surgical practice in 1963 with Dr Kevin McNamara. Surgery was provided at his beloved Mater Misericordiae (now Mercy Hospital) in Epsom, staffed by the nuns. With the opening of the new North Shore Hospital in 1984, he became part of the inaugural general surgical team with Dr Pat Alley. Small boat yachting was an important leisure activity during this period, but despite his best efforts he was unable to persuade the family to join him.

Pat Alley observed: "I had the good fortune to have John Gillman as a teacher, mentor and latterly, a colleague."

"In 1972 I was on the surgical training programme in Auckland, where John was a significant contributor to our education. When I returned to Auckland in 1977 as a tutor specialist, after a three-year sojourn in the UK, John became a supportive and knowledgeable mentor. At that

stage he was not only a busy adult General Surgeon, but he also managed the paediatric surgical service with Campbell MacLaurin, Sam Burcher and Laurie Smith.

“In 1984 we teamed up at the newly opened North Shore Hospital, working closely together for the next ten years. John was a particularly astute and careful surgeon. How to operate came naturally to him, but his real skills were the important temporal dimensions of surgery; namely when to operate and most critically when NOT to operate. He was an excellent teacher and, unsurprisingly, was appointed to the RACS Court of Examiners in 1971, serving a six-year term.”

A highlight of John’s professional career was watching Professor Umberto Veronesi in Milan in 1980 performing groundbreaking quadrantectomy for breast cancer. This procedure largely replaced the radical Halstead mastectomy for most breast cancer.

In 1994 John retired from medicine and, with Peggy, moved to rural Matakana to begin his second career with the help of his family. Under the oenological expertise of his youngest son, Toby, the Gillman Vineyard was developed, producing an award-winning Bordeaux that garnered widespread praise. John worked regularly in the vineyard until age 94 years, when he and Peggy moved into a retirement home at Warkworth.

A lovely, caring gentleman with an ever-curious mind, John wasn’t always the loudest voice in the room but was often the most thoughtful. He was a talented violinist and a lifelong advocate for classical music. A frustrated golfer, a keen skier (the cause of 50 years of knee arthritis), an intrepid swimmer and yachtsman, he deeply regretted various investments, including sheep, orchid and kiwifruit farming. He found joy in home carpentry and lively discussions over a glass of wine but claimed that “a good guy cutting” was the highlight of his week.

John, aged 97 years, died in September 2021 at the North Shore Hospital following a short battle with pneumonia, whilst the world battled COVID-19. He is deeply missed by his wife Perry (with whom he had just celebrated his 60th wedding) anniversary), children Sarah, Campbell, Emma and Toby, and nine grandchildren. John Campbell Gillman’s legacy as a skilled surgeon and dedicated vigneron will continue to be celebrated.

This obituary was prepared by Sarah Gillman FRACGP and family, and Pat Alley FRACS.

Dr Allan Panting FRACS