

Celebrated NSW surgeon receives coveted award

5 December 2019

Inspirational Newcastle surgeon and Fellow of the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons (RACS), Associate Professor Kelvin Kong, was last week presented with the Graham Coupland medal in recognition of his distinguished career.

The medal was presented by Dr Ken Loi, Chair of the College's New South Wales State Committee to Mr Kong, in front of family, friends and colleagues as part of a special ceremony at the NSW Parliament House.

"The medal is named in honour of a brilliant and natural surgeon, Graham Coupland. The intent is to recognise surgeons with a dedicated history of service not just to our profession, but also to the broader community," Dr Loi said.

"Through his tireless efforts and committed advocacy in a range of different areas, Mr Kong has made an enormous contribution to our society and improved the lives of so many Australians. He is most deserving and is the embodiment of what this award stands for."

Upon gaining his Fellowship in 2007 Associate Professor Kong became Australia's first Aboriginal surgeon. Today he is one of only three Indigenous surgeons in Australia, and is passionate about addressing the disparity in health outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children.

In particular, Associate Professor Kong has been a key driver in improving the ear health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. The World Health Organisation has previously estimated that Aboriginal children have among the highest rates of chronic otitis media (ear disease) in the world. Some studies have suggested that up to 90 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in remote communities present with otitis media.

When left untreated the disease can result in hearing impairment and contribute to behavioural problems that affect a child's social, emotional and educational development.

Each year, Associate Professor Kong spends a portion of his time working in, and for, remote Australian communities providing access to quality healthcare that would otherwise be limited or unavailable. He has also been at the forefront of campaigns such as #EarHealthForLife, and worked with governments at all levels to try and achieve better health outcomes.

Earlier this year Associate Professor Kong helped to launch the *Yarn for Life* initiative, a new initiative by Cancer Australia. Figures suggest that on average Indigenous Australians are 40 per cent more likely to die from a cancer diagnosis than non-Indigenous Australians. The initiative aims to reduce the impact of cancer within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities by encouraging and normalising discussion about the disease.

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As part of the ceremony Associate Professor Kong delivered the Graham Coupland Lecture where he spoke of his passion for paediatrics and surgery, his belief in education and the pride he derives in serving the broader community.

“From the age of near birth right through to 2 or 3 years of age, it’s a crucial time that we learn to hear, speak and see,” Associate Professor Kong said.

“There is nothing more unequal than the equal treatment of unequal people. Rather than focusing on equality, we need to achieve equity. We can predict some of the younger patients, their health outcomes, education outcomes, life-long employment prospects and social support changes as they grow from 5 years to 25 years.

“We are in the position of influence and power to improve, advocate for patient accessibility and influence those in positions of and decision making to achieve diversity and equity.”

Associate Professor Kong’s Graham Coupland Medal adds to an already impressive list of achievements, including a recent Honour Roll mention for Australian of the Year.

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About the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons (RACS): RACS is the leading advocate for surgical standards, professionalism and surgical education in Australia and New Zealand. The College is a not-for-profit organisation that represents more than 7000 surgeons and 1300 surgical trainees and International Medical Graduates. RACS also supports healthcare and surgical education in the Asia-Pacific region and is a substantial funder of surgical research. There are nine surgical specialties in Australasia being: Cardiothoracic surgery, General surgery, Neurosurgery, Orthopaedic surgery, Otolaryngology Head-and-Neck surgery, Paediatric surgery, Plastic and Reconstructive surgery, Urology and Vascular surgery.
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