

John Hunter Williams B.SC, MB ChB, FRCS, FRCS(ED), FRACS

26 June 1925 – 20 November 2020

John Hunter Williams was born at Wharewhitu Private Hospital in Dannevirke. His father Charles Skinner Williams was an Orthopaedic and General Surgeon (who was also involved in veterinary Orthopaedics) in the Manawatu area. He was given the name John Hunter in memory of the 18th century Scottish anatomist-surgeon from St Bartholomew's, who along with his brother, William Hunter, was a famous anatomic and surgical pioneer (and possible grave robber) – thus John's fate was sealed – he just had to become a surgeon!!

Charles "retired" from surgical practice in Palmerston North and became a Surgeon / GP in the Far North, based at Kaeo Hospital. Thus started a love of the Far North for John.

John attended Hadlow Preparatory School in Masterton (he was one of 18 pupils). As a teenager he contracted polio and was left with left sided weakness; he was able to recover sufficiently to study at Whanganui Collegiate.

He took up study at Dunedin staying at Selwyn College (his father Charles had been at Knox).

John's son Charles, a GP in Howick, Auckland, would also stay in Selwyn in future years – in John's old room no less (but he never found "JHW" carved in the wood paneling!)

He was interested in radio and electronics and studied for his BSc – after graduation entering second year at the Medical School. In his memoirs, he states (with typical humility) that he was not good enough in mathematics to have a career in radio engineering or physics!

He spent his fifth year selective at Kaitaia Hospital, and his final year as a medical student in Auckland, to be closer to the family in Northland, graduating MB ChB in 1951. While in Auckland, he would frequently do extra work after hours in the Casualty Department for experience. It was here that he had met a Canadian nurse, Sister Joan Hammond, who was on a working holiday travelling the world. She came to like NZ, and John, and she and John subsequently married in Kaeo, keeping her here in NZ!

John was a house surgeon in the Auckland District Health Board. For his first house surgeon job, he was assigned to Plastic Surgery at Middlemore Hospital under Mr W.M. Manchester.

The Plastic Surgery Unit was in its infancy and John was only its third Plastic Surgery house surgeon. A previous house surgeon Jack Sinclair (later Professor of Physiology at the new Auckland Medical School) warned John to pay great attention to Mr Manchester's teaching, so he could repeat the litanies exactly word-for-word on the ward rounds - as would many subsequent medical students, house surgeons and registrars have to also! In his memoirs, John recalls Mr Manchester's willingness to teach, taking every opportunity to do so – ward rounds, clinics, and theatre lists.

Subsequently John worked as a house surgeon in General Surgery at Auckland and at Greenlane Hospitals. In his second year, having enjoyed the supportive atmosphere and spirit of Middlemore, he asked to return there, being assigned to the Clarke/Innes General Surgery team, Harman Smith for Orthopaedics, Ross Dreadon for General Medicine, and another stint in Plastic Surgery with Mr Manchester.

In 1954 John became the Plastic Surgery registrar (but was also the General Surgery registrar at the same time!) He and the new full-time Orthopaedic surgeon O.R. Nicholson both had an interest in hands and frequently combined to treat hand injuries, something that would eventually be formalized some years later.

John had decided that he wanted to be a surgeon from the time of his graduation; he briefly flirted with the thought of anaesthetics, but apparently, Mr Manchester insisted that he should not be anything other than a Plastic Surgeon.

After two years as a registrar, John was given a grant in 1956 to travel to Britain, to obtain a Fellowship in Surgery. Joan and their then two boys, Charles and Matthew, travelled to Canada, to be with the Hammond family, while John travelled to England as a ship's medical officer on the Shaw Savill MV "Taranaki".

He stayed at the Nuffield Accommodation of the College of Surgeons, London, and attended various courses prior to sitting for the Fellowship. He also worked as a prosector at The Royal College of Surgeons, with small jobs at The Royal Marsden Hospital, and Smallfields in Surrey.

He obtained both his Edinburgh and English Fellowships. Joan and the children came over to England and for a short time they were reunited as a family living in Nutley, Sussex, until the cold weather drove them home (and Mr Manchester summoned John back to Middlemore!).

From June 1958 John was a Full Time Plastic Surgeon at Middlemore Hospital. He now had a dedicated Plastic Surgery registrar and a house surgeon. During John's absence overseas, Mr Manchester had obtained the FRACS, and John too was encouraged to do so, passing this in 1963, the same day as Joan Chapple, the first woman Plastic Surgeon in Australasia.

John saw a progression in anaesthesia practice from the referring GPs and hospital house surgeons giving anaesthetics, to anaesthetics being given by specialist anaesthetists; so too from procaine infiltration with heroin sedation, to open chloroform and ether. Mr Manchester insisted the best anaesthesia was ether, but younger anaesthetists were more keen on more modern techniques, and from a surgical point of view it enabled use of bipolar diathermy instead of multiple 5/0 silk ties, and without the risk of explosions! So too John saw the change from nurse-threaded sutures to pre-bonded atraumatic sutures. This all had especially important consequences for the two areas of Plastic Surgery that John would develop a worldwide reputation in – cleft lip and palate and hypospadias. An innovation John developed was to bore a hole in the hard palate in a cleft palate patient to enable attachment of the lateral palatal Veau flaps, enabling less bleeding, less scarring and a better long-term result.

Mr Manchester became involved with more and more overseas trips in his role in the ranks of the IPRS, becoming Secretary General, and being in demand as a visiting professor. This meant that John could do cleft lip and palate surgery whenever Mr Manchester was absent. In addition, as the volume of cleft lip and palate patients became too large for Mr Manchester to do himself, John came to do more and more of this delicate surgery. He also took over the treatment of hypospadias patients from Mr Manchester.

John entered private practice at the insistence of Mr Manchester in 1965, having rooms initially at 101 Remuera Road with a group of Orthopaedic Surgeons and radiologists, and later at 81a Remuera Road, with his own purpose designed rooms (designed especially for him by a long-term patient). He operated at the Mater Hospital, and subsequently also the Auckland Adventist Hospital.

Meanwhile he continued with his work on hypospadias at Middlemore Hospital employing one-stage repairs for distal hypospadias and two stage for the more severe proximal. He presented "an account of his efforts" at the IPRS World Congress in Melbourne. At the same meeting, Charles Devine and Charles Horton presented their work on one-stage repairs and performed a televised operation. Later he would travel to Norfolk, Virginia, to a meeting on Reconstructive Genital Surgery organized by Charles Horton. Their results were excellent, so John adopted the Horton-Devine techniques, including the one-stage flip-flap and the free preputial lining graft techniques, and taught and demonstrated them to younger surgeons in NZ and Australia. He modified it further using a Durham-Smith waterproofing waistcoat flap. John shared exactly the same birthday with Charles Horton and they were thenceforth friends and correspondents. On one occasion John presented a video of his proximal hypospadias free graft technique at the Annual Scientific Meeting of the RACS, accompanied by Handel's Water music, to spontaneous applause because his technique was so fluid! Other developments were the adoption of the Gibbons catheter (rather than a perineal urethrostomy) and caudal anaesthesia.

John became involved in College organisation, becoming a Plastic Surgery Division Board member and later Chairman, as well as being a College examiner for a number of years.

John visited Western Samoa with Interplast Australia, but was not happy to do cleft lip and palate or hypospadias surgery, as he was concerned that the patients would be left without adequate follow-up. So too he spent time in South Vietnam at Qui Nhon Hospital with the civilian surgical team at the time of the Tet Offensive – a dangerous time!

William Manchester retired from his post at Middlemore Hospital in 1979 and John became Head of Department. The unit had grown from one Plastic Surgeon and house surgeon in 1952 to six surgeons with six registrars and four house surgeons. He continued to work on cleft lip and palate and hypospadias up until his hospital board enforced retirement at age 65 in 1990.

He developed a worldwide reputation, not just in one area of expertise, but two – both cleft lip and palate and hypospadias.

After retirement from his Part Time Visiting Surgeon position, he was reemployed by his successor, and continued to do outpatient clinics and surgery at Middlemore and also for a time, at Waitakere Hospital. John continued in private practice for some years also.

Away from Plastic Surgery, John had a number of interests. He loved tinkering with devices such as machines, taking them apart and repairing them. So too he was intensely interested in computers, becoming an acknowledged expert in the Linux operating system.

He became proficient in social media having his own Instagram account and communicating with grandchildren and great-grandchildren in this manner well into his 96th year.

His garden in Pakuranga was a source of great pride.

John's father had built a matchbox-sized one-room bach at Tauranga Bay, adjacent to Whangaroa Harbour, in the Far North. It was here that the Williams family would travel for many holidays over the years. Fishing was excellent and John built a Sunburst sailing dinghy from plans in the 1960s – it is still being sailed in Tauranga Bay by the family today. John would often sail around the Whangaroa area well into the 2000s. A review of family holiday photos shows lots of sun, sunhats, and especially smiles.

John was a very supportive family man – his beloved Joan and his children, grandchildren and great grandchildren were very dear to him.

John was a superb surgeon with world-renowned expertise in two major areas - both cleft lip and palate and hypospadias – a rare achievement. He had extremely high standards and was unceasingly humble as a surgeon, often remarking after a great operation that it was a barely adequate result – “perfection is only just good enough”. He was always very considered in his advice to others, and like his predecessor WMM, he was a patient and excellent teacher.

He passed away after a short illness at the place that he had spent over 45 years of his life – Middlemore Hospital - on November 20, 2020. His beloved wife Joan predeceased John by four years.

His children and their partners, Charles and Phyllis, Matthew and Janice, Andrew and Anne, James, Joanna and David; grandchildren Jonathan, Sarah, Amanda, Molly; and great grandchildren Brynn, Paityn, George, survive him.

“The kauri is fallen,
The karakia chanted,
The long haul charted,
The giant lies still.” Nancy Bruce, 1960.

Cary Mellow FRAC