

## OBITUARY

**JOHN PIERCY COUTTS FRACS  
GENERAL SURGEON  
21 JUNE 1926 - 5 FEBRUARY 2020**

John was born in Palmerston North to Charles and Lillian Coutts, dairy farmers. One of two children, he was schooled locally, at Whakarongo Country School. He had an early exposure to social justice when on his first day at school his brand-new slate was annexed by his teacher and allocated to another pupil. Primary school was notable for eeling expeditions on his uncle's farm next to the school and the award of a swimming certificate after being swept down the Manawatu river - confirming a lifetime aversion to swimming.

Moving on to Palmerston North Boys High School his skills were honed in another direction, when he became a gifted cannon, firearms and bomb manufacturer. A nonfatal shooting accident involving a homemade .22 calibre pistol resulted in a hurried bike trip to the local river to dispose of the gun, and a tightening up on militant activities. With the country at war, all pupils were in military cadets and by school's end John had passed his aviation navigation exams, learned Morse code to high proficiency and come 2nd in the school machine gun competitions. Luckily the war ended before he became a member of the next echelon for Bomber Command. Advised by the headmaster not to sit university entrance because his failure would damage the school stats, he arranged a three-month exemption from the afternoon milking duties to study, and duly matriculated.

John shifted to Wellington to work for New Zealand Post and Telegraph as an engineering cadet and completed a physics degree. Advised by a kindly senior mentor that he had a bleak future in the "P & T" and should redirect his career, he applied for and gained entry to Otago Medical School. Boarding in Queen Street he cycled to and from the medical school on an antique bike. Parked in an alcove at the medical school it went missing numerous times, but always resurfaced - essentially a progenitor of the current day green bike schemes. Holidays were spent working as a linesman or deerstalking.

On graduation he returned to Palmerston North as a house surgeon and subsequently, registrar. A short stint as a locum GP in Dannevirke gave him a lasting respect for the arduous life of rural GPs. Towards the end of his junior doctor days, after a whirlwind courtship, and on his 32nd birthday, John married Lois Pine. Three weeks later they left for England, John working his passage as ship's doctor. There he obtained employment and training in London and Plymouth, becoming FRCSEng and FRCSEd.

John and Lois, now with two children, returned to Palmerston North in 1961, when John took a position as a senior registrar. Following the sudden death of one of his senior colleagues, he became a consultant. His interests in surgery were broad, including head and neck, breast, endocrine, upper GI, colorectal, paediatric surgery and urology. For many years he was the main provider of emergency head injury surgery. In 1969/70 John and Lois, now with a family of five children, returned to the UK spending 15 months in Leeds while John acquired endoscopic urology skills.

John delighted in teaching and training the next generation of surgeons. Unlike most surgeons, John never had a private practice. Perhaps the reason lies behind his comment to his nine-year-old son in a British Cathedral. Pointing to a beautiful carved figure in the darkest recess of the roof, visible only due to a spotlight trained on it, he commented - "Imagine the man who laboured for weeks to make such a beautiful figure. He was paid a pittance and knew it was to be placed in perpetual darkness, his craft unrecognised. The only real reward was the joy and pride of an artisan, who gave his best to make the finest product. Artisans are the backbone of civilised society and we surgeons belong to the brotherhood of artisans". John retired at 62; his prime motivation for such an early retirement was to ensure he left surgery before there was any risk of a declining performance that would affect patient outcomes.

Throughout his life John had a warped and impish sense of humour, but endearing to friends, family and patients. He estimated approximately 30,000 people had been scarred by his hand! Outside of surgery, John had a relentless interest in construction, beginning with the addition of a second storey to the family home. A swimming pool was constructed and a sailing dinghy. Later, when established on the family

farm, mass tree felling, fencing, water reticulation and dam building and the construction of workshops and sheds became a way of life. He restored a number of stationary engines and delighted in being able to repair virtually anything mechanical. His colleagues ironically pointed out that John would have been an excellent engineer.

John's sentimental nature was partly responsible for a major life event that precipitated his decline into frailty. Every Christmas he tasked himself with procuring the family Christmas tree. When nearly 90, undertaking this annual task, he slipped off a high roof and sustained a severe intracranial bleed. Following a trip to Wellington to evacuate the haematoma, he recovered enough to drive and live independently, but this marked the start of slow decline towards frailty and he eventually died aged 93.

John is survived by Lois, who gave him unwavering support and devotion, five children, and ten grandchildren. John will be fondly missed in the Manawatu.

*This obituary was provided by Richard Coutts FRACS*