**OBITUARY**

**EMERITUS PROFESSOR JOHN MILES LITTLE EP AM AO  
GENERAL SURGEON   
28 DECEMBER 1933 – 30 SEPTEMBER 2023**

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| Though he would have been the first to affirm the inevitability and describe in detail the likely process of his passing, it is nevertheless almost inconceivable to his family, friends, and colleagues, that surgeon and teacher Professor Miles Little has died of heart failure at the age of 89.  A true polymath – scientist, philosopher, humanist, and poet – Miles was a visionary, someone who genuinely changed the landscape of medicine and medical ethics through the force of his ideas. But just as importantly, Miles created lasting influence by the way he lived his own life and the way that he treated others - through his integrity, kindness, thoughtfulness, hospitality and wisdom.  Miles was the son of orthopaedic surgeon Norman Little and Marion Elinor Friend. His childhood was spent in Yass, Burradoo and Sydney, and later, following his parents’ divorce, in O’Connell in the Central West of NSW, where he developed a love of horses and a keen interest in native birds and plants. His father kept bees in the family garden in Vaucluse, and in 1942, Miles watched from the garage roof as midget submarines of the Imperial Japanese Army fired shells from Sydney harbour along the street in Rose Bay in which he would later live. |  |

Miles’ respect for knowledge and ideas was not, however, restricted to the humanities – but also included the physical and social sciences. This brought him back to Sydney University where he studied medicine and set aside the prospect of training for the Australian Olympic team.

In 1958 he married Judith Woodward, daughter of then Governor of NSW Sir Eric Woodward. Together they had 3 children, Alistair, Ruth and Julia, and housed a succession of pets including basenji dogs, blue-tongued lizards, cats and tropical fish.

Miles completed his internship as Resident Medical Officer at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital (RPAH), Sydney and from 1961 to 1964 he was Surgical Registrar at the Hospital. He gained his Fellowship of the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons (RACS) in 1963. Throughout this time, he also worked in various academic roles, firstly as a Demonstrator in Anatomy and then as a Tutor in Surgery to both the Women’s College and St Paul’s College at the University of Sydney. In 1964 Miles became Clinical Superintendent at RPAH.

During his time at RPAH, Miles worked alongside and was profoundly influenced by Professors John Loewenthal and Frank Mills, developing a particular interest in vascular and hepatobiliary surgery. In 1966, he was awarded the Nuffield Dominion Travelling Fellowship and travelled with his young family to Scotland, where he trained at the University of Glasgow under Sir Andrew Kay.

Returning to Australia via the USA in 1967, Miles became Honorary Assistant Surgeon at RPAH and Senior Lecturer in Surgery at the Faculty of Medicine – becoming Associate Professor in 1971. During this time, he was a highly active teacher and researcher – conducting bench and clinical research on a wide range of issues including, peripheral vascular disease, liver and bile duct and pancreatic disease, and cancer chemotherapy. He published a book on the management of liver injuries in 1971 and another on amputations for vascular disease in 1975.

In 1978, Miles married his second wife Penelope Vincent (née Whitelaw) and became stepfather to her daughter, Phoebe. In the same year he became the Foundation Professor of Surgery at the newly established Westmead Hospital, a position he held until 1996, and Chairman of the Department of Surgery until 1990. The family moved to a five-acre bushland property in Sydney’s north-west, where they hosted uproarious dinner parties and kept a new array of animals, including a pony and a rottweiler notorious for upending visiting academics.

Miles’ brave and far-sighted decision to be part of the Westmead project, far from the established intellectual bastions of medicine in Sydney, was a key moment in his life, in the successful development of the hospital, and in the future of Australian health services. Throughout this period, Miles, who was a legendary storyteller, developed a close friendship with painter Russell Drysdale and his wife Maisie, collaborating with Drysdale on a volume of poetry, *Round Trip*. A passionate bushwalker and photographer, he spent much of his spare time loping along less-travelled tracks in the national parks of NSW, stooping to gently move aside leaf litter blown across eloquent Aboriginal rock carvings.

He shared the visionary and energetic leadership of the unique Westmead project within a close partnership with Professor Peter Castaldi (Professor of Medicine) and Dr Bernie Amos (CEO), creating an extraordinary new public teaching hospital that placed the community at the centre of all its activities, that was conscious of inequity and the social determinants of health, that privileged multidisciplinary work and that saw research, teaching and clinical service as indivisible parts of health care. Under their guidance, Westmead thrived, attracting scores of clinicians, researchers, teachers, and trainees anxious to practise medicine that mattered not just to the local community or to the NSW population, but to the globe.

During this time Miles held visiting Professorships in the United Kingdom, China and Hong Kong. In 1987, he was Co-founder and Foundation President of the World Association of Hepatic, Pancreatic and Biliary Surgeons, which later became the International Hepato-Pancreato-Biliary Association (IHPBA). He was the recipient of numerous national and international wards which recognized his prowess in surgery. In 1993 he was made a Member of the Order of Australia for “his services to medicine, particularly in the fields of hepatic and vascular surgery”. Westmead Hospital truly had a giant as its Foundation Professor of Surgery, not only in stature, but as a supreme academic clinician, technical surgeon, researcher, administrator, as well as a poet, humanist and philosopher.

Then, quite remarkably, in 1995 Miles stopped practising surgery to establish an ethics centre at the University of Sydney – the Centre for Values, Ethics and the Law in Medicine (VELiM) - because he believed that medicine had lost sight of its moral base and humanist foundations and had begun to serve technocratic and scientific imperatives instead of the lives and interests of patients and their communities.

This Centre attracted extraordinary scholars from many disciplines and created “conversational spaces” that privileged attention to lived experience, genuine interdisciplinarity, dialogue, methodological rigor and critical inquiry.

Under Miles’s leadership, the atmosphere at VELiM was uniquely constructive, lively, and intellectually daring. Ethical principles of power sharing and inclusivity produced new thinking, new resources, warm collegial processes, and life-long friendships. Many of the scholars nurtured there have become leaders in their fields, establishing research programs and centres of their own. Above all, the Centre created a community, not merely academic and social, but a moral community founded on intellectual generosity, hospitality, humane values and conversation.

Miles Little stepped down as director in 2003, but continued at the Centre in an informal capacity, fostering new ideas, new relationships and new conversations about values and flourishing. He consistently provided his students and colleagues with security and skills to grow and to think differently, bravely and humanely. His door was always open. He was always willing to provide support and guidance – a question, a useful text, a hitherto unexamined line of enquiry that might help to tackle a moral or intellectual problem. Until 2020, he kept an office at the Centre which was filled with books, paintings and cultural objects given as gifts on his many travels and collaborations with communities and teaching institutions across Australia and around the world.

Miles’s vision and creative energy, his continuous examination of human flourishing, his distrust of power and medical dominance, and his emphasis on narratives and discourse was expansive and infectious. His writing – always clear, insightful, and accessible – was theoretically rich, authentic and deeply humane; seeking not to provide an ‘answer’ but to open up issues for examination and discussion. He continued to supervise PhD students and to welcome friends, colleagues and researchers to his home, where they were met with kindness and unflagging attention, right up to his death. In 2014, Miles was further honoured by appointment as an Officer in the Order of Australia (AO) “for distinguished service to medicine through the development and promotion of public policy on medical values, ethics and the law”.

Miles was a devoted husband, father, grandfather, and friend with an intense appreciation of music, art, literature, poetry, and the lived and natural environment. A committed and sometimes compulsive collector of watches and clocks, he drew on his surgical skills and instruments to become a watch-mender, never losing interest, even when he developed a tremor in his careful hands, in the precise and complex mechanisms that make us tick.

The final years of Miles’s life brought difficulties – and new insights. The loss of friends, an increasingly bureaucratic University environment, his own frailty, and,above all, the deep sadness he felt at his wife Penny’s diagnosis of Alzheimer’s disease, impacted his sense of flourishing, and made him question his value to others. But the reality was that even when confronted with personal, professional, and existential challenges he remained intensely vibrant, utterly lucid, endlessly curious about ideas and about the lives of others and consistently supportive of efforts to continue the critical examination of values in healthcare. He continued to treasure time, conversation, laughter, love, the care and company of his stepdaughter Phoebe, and visits by family and friends across four generations. And always, as he was in every setting, he remained kind, humble, witty and intensely compassionate.

He was remarkable, unique, and irreplaceably knowledgeable – and will be greatly missed.

***(This tribute was compiled by Professor Stephen Deane, entirely from contributions from Professor Ian Kerridge and Professor John Fletcher)***