Robert Bohdan Mikolaj (Bob) Ravich

MBChB (Otago), FRACP; 1937–2012

Bob Ravich, general physician and clinical haematologist, practised and taught medicine at the highest level. He integrated a prodigious knowledge of human anatomy, physiology, psychology and empathy with current and breaking medical science, practising the ‘art’ of medicine with discernment and perspicacity. Proficient in lateral thinking, he became the doctors’ doctor; the person to whom other doctors referred difficult diagnostic problems.

To the majority of patients he became a friend; a trusted partner who accompanied them on their medical journeys giving them the confidence that he knew where they were going and would travel with them whether the outcome was cure, remission or death.

It was not unusual for him to sit with a patient in their last hours to calm them in their final transition.

Although academia was not his passion, he lectured, tutored, examined and mentored many students throughout his career and was in his element when teaching the ‘art’ of medicine—active listening, careful observation, eliciting confirmatory physical signs. He inspired many, imbuing them with a sense of purpose and excellence in practice that contributes significantly to his medical legacy.

Born in Gdansk, Poland in 1937, he and his mother escaped in 1939, travelling through the incoming German army to eventually reach the comparative safety of England. He finally met his father at the age of 8 on the Glasgow Railway Station.

The family emigrated to New Zealand post WWII and Bob graduated in Medicine, MBChB (Otago) in 1962. He undertook his residency training in Christchurch Hospital, New Zealand, staying on as Senior Medical Registrar in 1966 and Senior Registrar in Haematology in 1967.

Bob moved to Sydney with his wife Chris and their young family in 1968 when he was appointed Senior Research Fellow in Haematology at Sydney Hospital and Honorary/Visiting Physician in 1970. He became a Fellow of the Royal Australasian College of Physicians in 1972.

Bob established a Private Practice as a Consultant Physician in Clinical Haematology/General Medicine in Macquarie Street in 1971, despite warnings from some colleagues that, as he was not a graduate of Sydney University, this was unlikely to succeed. It did.

He moved the Practice to St Leonards in 1978 when he was appointed Visiting Medical Officer (VMO) at the then brand new Royal North Shore Hospital and
eventually to Crows Nest in 2004 to be closer to the Mater Hospital. On his retirement in 2006 he sold the Practice to colleagues as a productive and dynamic business with an ethos of excellence in patient care and the art of medicine.

Although a professed atheist, Bob shared a focus on compassionate patient care with the Sisters of Mercy, his relationship with the Mater Hospital growing over time and ranging from his initial appointment in 1972 as Honorary/Visiting Physician in Clinical Haematology/Oncology and General Medicine, to serving as a Director on the Board from 1993-2001.

In 1994 he conceived and founded the Department of Cancer Medicine at the Mater, chairing it until he stepped down in 2001. This Department was structured to provide total and multidisciplinary care to the patient with cancer, from the time of diagnosis to cure or death.

Without Bob’s vision and drive the Mater would not be the centre of excellence in cancer care that it is today. The existence of the Department of Cancer Medicine and the Chemotherapy Cottage where it was initially centred, laid the foundation for the future development of the Patricia Ritchie Centre for Cancer Care and Research and the establishment of the Poche Centre to house the Melanoma Institute of Australia.

In the latter years of his life, Bob had the opportunity to guide the distribution of significant financial donations to both medicine and conservation. He undertook this with the same deliberation and attention to detail that he applied to his own medical work, directing funds to specific projects within organisations such as the NSW Leukaemia Foundation, the Institute for Emerging Infections and Biosecurity at the University of Sydney, and BirdLife Australia.

Bob was an insatiably curious, cultivated and creative person, more inclined to lead from behind than from the front; to encourage others and eschew the limelight—and all was permeated with a robust sense of humour and of the ridiculous. Outside medicine he had a broad range of diverse interests. He read widely—everything from Bulfinch’s Mythology to Latham’s Quarterly—assembling an extensive library of Science Fiction along the way. His great love of music resulted in another library described by his daughter as ‘iTunes before its time’.

His love and respect for nature, shared with his wife Kate, led them to purchase a newly covenanted Private Forest Reserve on King Island, Tasmania, in 2004, in part as a contribution towards the preservation of biodiversity. His love of and fascination with language inspired him to learn a new word everyday—something he continued up until the end. He was the ultimate pragmatist with a number of his own dictums that he lived by: “If a thing is worth doing, do it to excess” encapsulated his passionate embrace of life and, most recently as he faced his own death, “Life without death is meaningless”.

Bob died peacefully at his home in Sydney on 1 September 2012, surrounded by his family. He is survived by his wife Kate, children Stephen, Joanna and Katie and six grandchildren. As well as his family, his legacies embrace medicine, conservation and a positive influence on the lives of many.

Colleagues Prof Bruce Robinson, A/Prof Fran Boyle, and wife Kate Ravich wrote this obituary.