The Legacy of Percy Pease

Percy Pease was New Zealand’s first full-time paediatric surgeon and he firmly established paediatric surgery as a specialty in this country.

Born into humble beginnings in small-town rural South Africa in 1937, he faced great adversity before entering medical school.

Percy initially trained as a paediatrician but his qualifications were not recognised in South Africa. As he was in imminent danger of arrest there he crossed the border to Swaziland in 1968, leaving all his possessions behind.

He next went to England and gained his surgical qualifications before working at the Birmingham Children’s Hospital. During his time there the opportunity to travel to New Zealand arose.

When Percy arrived in 1974 the specialty of paediatric surgery was still in its infancy in New Zealand. For many years surgery on children was viewed as part of general surgery, and surgeons would operate on children relying on their general surgical training. These early pioneers made a remarkable contribution given their general scope and limited resources. A notable example was Henry Barrett, a provincial surgeon in New Plymouth who treated the first surviving child with oesophageal atresia in the southern hemisphere.

Princess Mary Hospital in Auckland was Percy’s first place of practise, purpose-built in 1918 for wounded American servicemen in the Pacific (Figure 1). It had an expected lifespan of 5–10 years but would become the home of the first Paediatric Thoracic Surgical Unit, under the bastion of Laurie Smith and Percy Pease. Percy was determined to deliver a paediatric patient-centred service, and together with Paul White, campaigned in the face of considerable opposition before the eventual opening of Starship Children's Hospital in 1991.

Percy’s reputation as a clinician and surgeon drew children from throughout New Zealand and the South Pacific. He undertook regular pro-bono medical missions to Samoa from 1979 and Tonga from 1981. He realised that many of the conditions he would encounter could be looked after in the first instance in the islands if the local surgeons were supported and upskilled.

A prime example of Percy’s immense contribution was his lifetime work in the sub-specialty of paediatric thoracic surgery, summarised in Table 1. He was quoted as saying, “Seeing a child smile up at you from their hospital bed after life-changing surgery makes it all worthwhile”.

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Percy had a gregarious personality and a philosophy that encouraged co-operation and respect in the treatment of patients. Throughout his 46 years of paediatric surgical
service he maintained strong and supportive working relationships with clinicians and colleagues within his hospital and around the country. He inspired and trained many of the current Paediatric Surgeons around the country.

With his recent passing an annual symposium bearing his name is dedicated to maintaining the ideals of co-operation, support and respect amongst colleagues, qualities he very much encouraged.²

He is fondly remembered and missed by colleagues and his legacy will continue. As Percy himself aptly surmised, “There have been lots of laughs and lots of tears. I’ve enjoyed every minute”.

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References: