OBITUARY

James (Jim) Escott Church
10 December 1923 – 21 February 2014, General Surgeon

James Church was born on 10 December 1923 in Dunedin, Otago to James Stuart Church, a general practitioner, and Kathleen Mary Ruth Church (nee O’Connor), a graduate in Home Science from Otago University and a music teacher. Jim had three younger siblings—Barbara, Roger and Jenny. His childhood was spent in Dunedin and in 1936 the family moved, first to Opunake, and finally New Plymouth, where James Stuart continued in general practice and also served as an anaesthetist.

Jim attended New Plymouth Boys High from 1936 to 1941, becoming both Dux and Head Boy in his final year. He earned a Taranaki Scholarship and a New Zealand University Bursary. In 1941 Jim entered Otago Medical School graduating MB ChB in 1947. He lived at Knox College, rooming with Paul Swinburn. Their exploits are legendary.

Jim had learned golf by caddying for his father, excelling at this sport throughout the rest of his life, winning a varsity blue and in later life going on to represent the Royal Auckland Golf Club in their Pennant team. Young Jim spent time in the Army Medical Corps before starting his surgical career as a house surgeon at Wellington Hospital in 1948. There he met Pamela Scantlebury, a clerical worker at W.D.H. Wills, and they married in 1949. Baby James was born a year later.

Jim, with Pam and James, travelled to England In 1951 as a Commonwealth fellow for advanced surgical training. He worked in Guy’s Hospital, London, under the guidance of famous breast surgeon Sir Hedley Atkins and gained fellowship of the Royal College of Surgeons, Edinburgh. In 1954 Jim, Pam, James and new brother, John, headed back to New Zealand on the Sydney Star, a 6-week trip via Cape Town.

Surgical jobs were scarce at that time and Jim decided to work as the only surgeon on Auckland’s North Shore, once Lester Aitken, the incumbent, retired. In the meantime Jim joined Cam D’Arcy, Arthur Coombes, Ken Nicholas and Neil Murray in general practice in Takapuna, delivering babies at the North Shore Maternity Hospital. Jim’s daughter, and youngest child, Phillipa was born in 1955. Lester Aiken duly retired and Jim, now FRACS, set up a surgical practice that was to influence the lives of many people on the Shore. With consulting rooms at Byron Chambers on Byron Avenue, he operated at Mellita and Lister Hospitals, and in 1958 became Consultant General Surgeon for the Royal New Zealand Navy at the Devonport Base Hospital.

The majority of Jim’s professional life was devoted to providing for the surgical needs of the residents of the North Shore. He was a careful, precise and gentle surgeon with excellent technique; technique that he taught to young James from a fairly early age. He was very well respected throughout the medical community, and became a New Zealand Medical Association Councillor. In 1974 he was President of the North Shore Division of the New Zealand Medical Association.

Jim and Pam Church were blessed with a wide circle of good friends and, on Pam’s side, a big extended family who all lived nearby. Jim possessed an infectious and mischievous sense of humour and there was always a twinkle in his eye. He was the life of any party and his good humour and kindness endeared him to everyone who met him.
In 1965 the family made its first trip to Turangi, where Jim had the use of the “Navy Hut”, a fairly basic fishing cottage by the Tongariro River at the Duchess Pool. This started a love affair with the Tongariro and its trout that lasted over 20 years and led to two houses in Turangi.

Another love of Jim’s life was music, and the sounds of Ella Fitzgerald, Frank Sinatra, Doris Day, Rosemary Clooney, Oscar Peterson and Vic Damone were always to be heard at home. Musicals were also popular, and the advent of the cassette tape allowed Jim to take his music into the operating room.

Jim became closely involved with Takapuna Rotary serving a term as President. He was a member of the Royal Auckland Golf Club spending many a happy afternoon on the course. In the 1970s Jim was visited by both joy and tragedy. Son James was one of the first graduates of the new Auckland Medical School, winning the Carrick Robertson Prize in Surgery and embarking on a surgical career, but Pam became terminally ill and passed away after a 2-year battle with cancer.

The next chapter in Jim’s life began when he met Maureen (Mause) Stokes. They were married in 1976 and lived happily by the beach in Milford. During this time he developed close friendships with a Tahitian family and made several trips to those idyllic islands. Jim continued his surgical practice in Takapuna and at the Naval Base, serving the local population by providing high quality care with kindness and thoughtfulness.

In 1993 he retired to spend time with Mause, at Milford Road, on the golf course, and at their house in Turangi. Jim loved gardening, and his time in Turangi was a chance to indulge this love. Jim and Mause bought a yacht and Jim qualified as a Master Mariner, sailing throughout the Hauraki Gulf. Jim and Mause also travelled extensively, including a trip to USA to attend his grandson’s wedding in 2002.

As Jim grew older he suffered a gradual loss of physical and mental powers, but enjoyed a commensurate and unending increase in Mause’s devotion. Jim passed away peacefully in Maureen’s arms at their home overlooking Milford Beach on 21 February 2014, at the age of 90. His funeral, at St Peter’s Church in Takapuna, was attended by many of his family and friends, with representation by the New Zealand Navy.

He had a long, happy life and left a legacy of love for Mause, a burgeoning family, and a host of grateful patients and friends, whose lives he influenced for the better. Jim is survived by Maureen, his wife of 37 years, James (a colorectal surgeon in Cleveland), John (a lawyer in Brisbane) and Phillipa (a journalist in Wellington). There are six grandchildren and four great-grandchildren. Jim is also survived by two sisters, Barbara Scott and Jenny Wright, and brother, Roger.

James Church (FRACS) and Allan Panting wrote this obituary.