Patrick Joseph Farry

Following his death on 8 October 2009 a lone helicopter spontaneously circled the Glenorchy Rd home of long-time, highly respected Queenstown general practitioner Pat Farry as a mark of respect. The same day his personal assistant at Otago Medical School arrived at work in Dunedin to find a flax wreath anonymously placed at his office door.

Both were among many personal tributes flowing in for Queenstown's much-loved medical man with mana.

Dr Farry died unexpectedly during a stint as a GP locum in Twizel, doing what he loved most, serving the rural community.

A fellow of the Royal New Zealand College of General Practitioners, Dr Farry was made a Distinguished Fellow in 2006.

He was highly respected for his contribution to rural medicine and GP education and in June 2009 was recognised for his immense contribution to rural medicine when he was made a member of the New Zealand Order of Merit in the Queen's Birthday Honours list.

Dr Farry packed much into his 65 years. Born and raised in Gore, he attended St Kevin's College in Oamaru before graduating with his medical degree from Otago University in 1967.

Dr Farry moved to Queenstown in 1971 where he built the former Queenstown Medical Centre, one of the first medical centres to open in the country. His wife Sue, a physiotherapist, set up in a building they developed next door.

"In those early days we ran clinics in Kingston and Glenorchy. "I drove the ambulance—our Combi van—with the baby and sometimes the dog in the back. I'd drive up to pick up the fractures from Coronet Peak. We didn't have an ambulance in those days," Mrs Farry recalled. It was these 35-odd years of invaluable Wakatipu practice experience that fed Dr Farry's huge passion for rural medicine, something for which he is now recognised globally.

Dr Farry devoted much of his career to advocating and lobbying for improvements and funding in rural medicine. He lobbied hard with successive government health ministers for funding for the now highly successful rural immersion programme for fifth-year medical students.
Since its inception in 2007 the programme has grown from just 6 students placed on the West Coast and in Queenstown to 20 students in 2009 placed as far north as Masterton and Dannevirke.

"Without Pat it wouldn't have happened, not without him harassing various ministers of health. He was instrumental in coercing various people at the university (Otago) and, in the finish, (minister of health) Pete Hodgson," Dr John Hillock, his partner in the Queenstown Medical Centre for many years, said.

In 1980 Dr Farry began travelling to Dunedin to lecture in the department of general practice at Otago University and in 1990 was made a senior lecturer. He was a former regional director of the Royal New Zealand College of General Practitioners’ registrar training programme, chair of the college's education committee and more recently sat on the board of the college's new rural faculty and was their representative on the Education Advisory Committee. He also served on the editorial board of the Journal of Primary Health Care.

A special newsletter tribute to Dr Farry from the college says its division of rural hospital medicine and the rural hospital doctors' vocational training programme, as well as the rural immersion programme "owe much to Pat's focus and determination".

He was due to fly to Australia later in October 2009 to audit and evaluate the Australian rural health programme at Melbourne's prestigious Monash University and Flinders University in Adelaide. "He felt this was a huge honour ... I felt it was the other way around," his personal assistant Michele Wilkie said.

This was the man's humility. Right down to his amusement at being awarded a Queen's Birthday honour this year. Dr Farry was highly acclaimed around the world, the masses of tributes flowing into his medical school office, from medical schools around the globe, testimony to this.

"He touched so many lives. Pat was the man with the mana. He could relate to absolutely everybody and his achievements were phenomenal—he will be irreplaceable here," Ms Wilkie said.

Dr Farry was recognised by the New Zealand Rural General Practice Network for his contribution to rural medicine in 2007 when he was awarded the Peter Snow Memorial Award. But in 2006 New Zealand Doctor summed up Pat Farry nicely when it awarded him the Buzz Lightyear Award for GPs who go "to infinity and beyond" in the line of duty.

"My father was selfless beyond understanding, always without question, judgment or negativity ... he had an incredible openness and empathy," son, Ben Farry said. His family say Dr Farry was never constrained by time or money when it came to giving of himself for others.

A few months before his death Dr Farry was to be given a mayoral function for his Order of Merit by the City of Dunedin, but instead drove from Dunedin to Queenstown after work to examine rural immersion students, leaving at 9pm to drive to Twizel where they needed a GP locum, Mrs Farry said.

Dr Farry was regularly volunteering his time, serving in 2005 as a volunteer doctor taking an expedition of 120 80-plus-year-olds to Italy for the 60th anniversary for the
Battle of Monte Cassino and offering his services to help in the aftermath of the Samoan tsunami. "Pat was never ever concerned about money, it never entered his reality," Mrs Farry said.

Before completing Punatapu luxury lodge, adjacent to their family home, which began as a "tiny cottage" in the 1970s, the Farry's lived without power or phone, using a generator.

Dr Farry was one of just three local doctors and on call every third night. A radio telephone was the only means of communication and his three sons remember it constantly crackling with their father driving off at all hours of the night to an emergency or to deliver a baby. "Dad delivered most of our friends," Ben said. Son Simon Farry said his father was constantly looking ahead. "He was so full of new ideas and never constrained by rules or regulations."

"Everything with Pat was an adventure, but he was always way, way too soon," laughed Simon, as he and Ben recalled their earliest memories, aged 6 and 4, of their father taking them to learn transcendental meditation. The family saw the world on its many travel expeditions, adventures often coupled with Dr Farry's studies overseas.

He was part of the first western delegation to China to study acupuncture and introduce it in medical practice in New Zealand and also studied on fellowships in North America. Dr Farry was loath to let go of the connections and relationships he had built in many years of general practice, thus postponing his retirement.

The last word from the man himself as quoted in New Zealand Doctor earlier this year:

"It's the community that you get to know that keeps you there, and while I've been threatening to retire for some time, one of the hardest things about retiring is that you finally cut the ties to the community and patients you have looked after for a long time."

Dr Farry is survived by his wife, Sue, sons Simon, Ben and Jude, his three daughters-in-law and two grandchildren.

Sue Fea of The Southland Times wrote this obituary entitled GP pioneered rural medicine; it was published on 14 October 2009 and has been amended slightly here.

NZMJ Note: Dr Pat Farry was a regular author and reviewer of the NZMJ; we appreciated his valuable input on articles related to rural health.

The Pat Farry Rural Health Education Trust was established in March 2010 (Patron: David Gerrard). For details see http://www.patfarrytrust.co.nz/