William John (Jack) Watt

26 October 1918 – 2 August 2011

Jack Watt was born in Ashburton, New Zealand, on 26 October 1918, the eldest of the three children of Lesley and Gladys Watt.

His education was at Ashburton Primary school, followed by St Andrew’s College, Christchurch, and Timaru Boys High School, before he proceeded to the University of Otago in Dunedin where he graduated MB ChB in 1944. His house surgeon time was broken by service with the New Zealand Army Medical Corps in Egypt, Italy and Japan in the later stages of World War II.

On his return to Auckland he was one of the first anaesthetic registrars in that city in 1948, before proceeding to the United Kingdom where he gained further experience and took his two-part D.A. He later became a Fellow of the Faculty of Anaesthetists of the Royal College of Surgeons.

During this time he married Rosamund Rae. They returned to Auckland in 1952, Jack to be a full-time specialist anaesthetist at Green Lane Hospital where he spent much time with the cardiothoracic team and administered the anaesthetic for the first cardiopulmonary bypass operation in New Zealand in 1958.

On Dr Eric Anson’s retirement, Jack Watt became Auckland’s second Director of Anaesthetic Services in 1958, a post he held until retirement in 1983. There have been no further directors in Auckland. As one of our southern colleagues remarked “It took a committee to replace Jack Watt”. During this long period, many changes took place with advances in anaesthesia techniques and equipment. The strength of the department which initially served four major hospitals and some minor ones grew, training of increasing numbers of young doctors was instituted and promoted, so the Auckland hospitals became a major teaching centre for anaesthesia under Jack Watt’s leadership and active participation.

He was also much involved in the promotion and teaching of cardiopulmonary resuscitation both for St John Ambulance personnel and other groups. The training of Pacific Island anaesthetists was also largely promoted and effected by Dr Watt, over many years.
Besides his duties as Director of Anaesthesia, Jack served New Zealand’s anaesthetic fraternity well. In the Faculty of Anaesthetists, Royal Australasian College of Surgeons, he became a Fellow in 1961 and was elected to the Board of the Faculty in 1968. He served as Assessor 1973–74, was Vice Dean 1974–75 and Dean of the Faculty of Anaesthetists 1976–1978—the first New Zealander to achieve this high office, equivalent now to President of the Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists. For his services, Jack was awarded the Faculty of Anaesthetists’ Medal in 1982.

Dr Watt was an early member of the New Zealand Society of Anaesthetists and became Secretary-Treasurer in 1953, was Vice President for 2 years and served as President in 1960 and 1961. Frequently he was a conference organiser and a willing speaker. Jack was made a Life Member of the Society in 1979 and was involved in setting up the Anson Memorial Foundation, being one of its early trustees.

In later years Jack Watt undertook a survey of anaesthetic services round the Pacific area for the World Health Organization and also reviewed training at the Anaesthesia Centre in Manila. For his services to anaesthesia and the St John Ambulance, Dr Watt was made an Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) in 1981. His long involvement with the Order of St John saw him become a Knight of Grace.

Jack Watt was a skilled and practical anaesthetist, a leader, a talented teacher, a first class administrator, a diplomat, a tactful negotiator, a congenial colleague and a good friend to many of us. He had great patience and I only ever saw him cross, once!

Jack was one of New Zealand’s most eminent anaesthetists and while on the Board of the Faculty of Anaesthetists gave New Zealand a strong presence in what was predominantly an Australian-oriented body. His diplomacy and resolution have given New Zealand a lasting legacy in international anaesthesia.

Jack died on 2 August 2011 and will be greatly missed, but he leaves us with great memories. We extend our deepest sympathy to his widow Rosamund, their four daughters and their families.

Basil Hutchinson (Retired Anaesthetist, Auckland) wrote this obituary.