Charles Frank Farthing

In 1981, Dr Charles Farthing finished a set of rounds at Christchurch Hospital, and heard the ringing bell of his old St Michael’s Primary School. It was the same bell he had heard for more than 25 years. Realising he had never travelled more than a kilometre from the home where he grew up, Farthing made a decision: life was too much the same, and it was time for something new. That decision changed the course of his life and took him around the globe to become a pioneer in the early recognition and treatment of Aids.

Farthing was born in Christchurch to an accountant father and music teacher mother, and was educated at Christ’s College. Here, he displayed an early leaning towards medicine when he became the first aider to the school’s rugby team.

He graduated from the University of Otago Medical School in 1976.

After leaving Christchurch in March 1981 he spent a year in Saudi Arabia and then drove across Europe, finally arriving in London to immediately take up a position with St Thomas’ Hospital in the latter half of 1982.

Volunteering time at an STD clinic in a low socio-economic neighbourhood he observed a pattern of rare conditions, such as Kaposi’s sarcoma, among some of the clinic’s patients. Farthing realised the unusual collection of skin ailments had a common theme.

Underlying all of them was a disease, which would later become widely known as acquired immune deficiency syndrome (Aids). In the early 1980s, very little was known about the disease. Still publicly perceived as a homosexual issue, governments were slow to introduce Aids as a top priority on the public health agenda.

But Farthing devoted the next 30 years of his life to researching, treating and raising the profile of the disease. Perhaps one of his most lasting medical contributions was in the research and institution of triple drug therapy, the treatment “cocktail” that has transformed Aids from a death sentence into a manageable disease and which became the standard of care for Aids sufferers for years.

It is difficult to estimate the impact of this work, which has become part of the treatment of millions of people globally. Such was Farthing’s passion for developing an HIV vaccine that he urged doctors to volunteer for testing the vaccines, and at one point injected himself with a promising agent to prove to any detractors that it was safe.

Despite the early controversy surrounding the Aids movement Farthing had “a knack for never making an enemy,” his brother, Bruce Farthing said. “He was very
courageous—he took on the world media and took on the British Government over Aids and its importance.”

“He had a brilliant mind. There was no doubt about that. But he was incredibly compassionate and empathetic.” Described as an “extraordinarily generous personality”, he was able to draw the support of both government and celebrity to the Aids cause.

Farthing was a friend of Elton John and Princess Diana, who became prominent spokespeople for the Aids movement. He worked across all strata of society to raise the profile of the disease, and was “just as comfortable having lunch with Princess Diana at Kensington Palace as he was working with Aids patients in the south of Los Angeles and the low socio-economic neighbourhoods of London,” Bruce said.

Farthing also campaigned long and hard for better recognition and treatment of the disease by governments and health professionals. He set up the country’s first Aids treatment clinics, and headed a parliamentary committee to develop British Government policy on the disease.

From there he earned a fellowship to the United States to study Aids and later became medical director of the Aids Healthcare Foundation. Neurosurgeon and colleague Quentin Durward said that even as Farthing achieved international renown, “his heart lay profoundly in sympathy with the suffering and dying population of Aids patients, and the huge pool of under-served patients in California.” He worked with community-based clinics to provide the highest quality of care to Aids patients otherwise unable to access expensive healthcare.

An “impish child with a wicked sense of humour,” he loved to pull pranks, and as an adult was irreverent and “deeply politically incorrect”. Farthing had a passion for arts and loved opera, ballet, and baroque. His favourite piece was Handel’s Messiah.

Before he developed an interest in medicine, he had intended to become a priest. He returned to New Zealand many times to visit friends and family but spent most of his professional life in the United States.

Farthing died of a heart attack after collapsing in a Hong Kong taxi. He was 60.

Reflecting on the breadth of his impact, memorial services for Charles Farthing were held in Hong Kong, Los Angeles, London and Christchurch.

While his impact was global, Bruce says his brother was “very much a son of Christchurch”, and the bells once again rang for Charles Farthing on the day of his funeral, which was held at St Michael and All Angels Church, Christchurch.

Charles Farthing is survived by his long-term partner, Doug Lui, and brother Bruce Farthing.

With Bruce Farthing’s assistance this obituary was adapted from one written by Tess McClure that appeared in The Press newspaper (Christchurch). We thank them for the reprint permission.