



Dr Janet Elder, AM, MBBS (MELB), FRCP, FRACP<sup>1</sup>  
9 / 6 / 1921 — 30 / 2 / 2009

Janet Elder was born and educated in Melbourne. She commenced studying medicine in 1941 at Melbourne University and the Alfred Hospital. When asked her reasons for studying medicine she said “I wanted to prove that I could do something very difficult and also worthwhile. I really felt I wanted to justify my existence especially during the war when so many people were away fighting”. She then did her residency at Launceston General Hospital 1946-48.

She contracted TB and was treated at a private sanatorium: Grenelle Sanatorium in Victoria. She had streptomycin and therapeutic pneumothorax over a period of 5 years and during that time she only worked for 3 months because of relapses. She had refills of herpneumothorax until 1956. She said “As a practising doc I was a very docile patient and just accepted my treatment.”

Following treatment of her TB she went to England and Scotland to work from 1952-6 and attained membership of the Royal College of Physicians (Edinburgh). She was elected to fellowship of that College in 1972 and was subsequently awarded fellowship of the Royal Australasian College of Physicians in 1975. Janet worked in Red Cross sanatoria (Tor-Na-Dee and Glen-O-Dee) in Aberdeenshire alongside Dr Dick Adams and then at Sully Hospital in Wales in general chest medicine. Doctors who had had TB often found employment difficult and frequently ended up working in sanatoria, because of having had TB and because they understood the disease.

In 1959 Janet was offered a job in Perth. She said “I got this offer of a job here (ie Perth Chest Hospital) in general chest diseases which is what I wanted. I felt that the treatment of TB was becoming less challenging and I wanted something a little more extensive. I came out as a senior house officer.” Soon after her arrival she had tests for TB again. Acid fast bacilli were positive from gastric contents and she was consigned to bed rest for a period and given PAS and INAH for 18 months. She lived in the hospital until 1965 and then moved to her own house which she said made her realize how much she had missed out on in life!

In 1961 (aged 40) she was appointed as a consultant at Sir Charles Gairdner and joined Bob Elphick and John Smyth. As a Commonwealth-funded hospital established initially for the treatment of tuberculosis the Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital was unusual as Janet said. “We didn’t have many acute cases because we didn’t have an emergency department so we didn’t see cases of pneumonia”. But “we were starting to see cases of asbestosis from Wittencoom Gorge and also to treat lung cancer and other forms of dust fibrosis”. “I began to keep a list of patients”. Janet’s sheets of butchers’ paper with her lists of mesothelioma patients and asbestosis patients still exist. Her mesothelioma list became the original Western Australian Mesothelioma Register, the first in Australia, which now exists in the WA Cancer Registry (in electronic form). In one interview she said “The mill (at Wittencoom) closed of course in 1966, not for the right reasons but for financial reasons. I am afraid that politically we didn’t do anything about it because we were too busy treating the results.”

She was “... dead against smoking and preached the gospel to the patients” and also “very interested in Cystic Fibrosis and wanted to contribute”.

After retiring in 1981 she became involved in hospice home care for 5 years. Through her church she was a driving force in establishing a pioneering welfare agency called Southcare which is still thriving today providing advocacy and support for disadvantaged families in the southern suburbs of Perth. This agency especially provides support for families in need of advocacy and has been especially successful in helping Indigenous families with their accommodation and home care services and with caring for their various and many needs in the home.

Janet was (belatedly) awarded a membership of the Order of Australia (AM) for her contribution to medicine in 1997. Janet became quite frail in later years but remained intellectually intact and alert so that when she had a fall and fractured her femur and was admitted to Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital to have it pinned she developed post-operative pneumonia and made a characteristically rational decision to refuse antibiotic treatment, dying in hospital

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a few days later. She had a long and possibly sad sort of life, thanks to her contracting TB, but it certainly was a courageous, exemplary and productive life and there is no doubt that she did contribute enormously.

Even after death, she keeps contributing. Janet left a generous bequest to TSANZ which now supports the Janet Elder International Travel awards. Three young career researchers receive an award at each TSANZ Annual Scientific Meeting, to support them presenting their research at a key international conference and continuing Janet Elder's vision to improve lung health in Australia and New Zealand.