

Donald Simpson

Neurosurgeon

The work of Simpson, seminal, which was undertaken during the second half of the last century, taught that the objective and goal for surgically treated [meningiomas](#) was to achieve the most radical removal possible ¹⁾

see [Simpson Grading System](#).

Donald Adrian Allen Simpson AO, D. Univ, M.D, M.S, FRCS, FRACS, FACRM Neurosurgeon 18 April 1927 - 22 May 2018

Donald Simpson was born 91 years ago into a Unitarian family with a strong tradition of learning and service.

He grew up in Burnside in the Adelaide foothills and travelled to school at St Peters College by pony or bike. He lived and died close to his original family home.

His academic record was outstanding - Tennyson medal for English Literature in the state school exams and then a series of scholarships and medals during his medical studies at the University of Adelaide.

He graduated in 1949. During his subsequent year as resident medical officer at the Royal Adelaide Hospital he published a study on neuroanatomy, the first of many research papers. He published his last paper, on medical history, in 2013.

In 1951 he began studies in Oxford in neuroanatomy under Professor Sir WE LeGros Clarke then undertook research in neuropathology and training in neurosurgery at the Radcliffe Infirmary under Mr J.B Pennybaker.

His research studies consisted of a clinical and pathological review of a series of meningiomas treated by Sir Hugh Cairns and Mr. J.B Pennybaker from which he developed a grading system relating the recurrence rate to the completeness of surgical removal. The Simpson Grading system remains a clinical standard.

He married Joanna ErlistounThomson of Adelaide, in London in 1952.

They returned to Adelaide in 1956 and Donald joined the neurosurgeon TAR (Jim) Dinning at the Royal Adelaide Hospital.

Over subsequent years these two colleagues and close friends laid the foundation for a neurosurgical department as a department of clinical excellence, research and training.

These were the days before scanning and trained junior staff. Neurosurgery was very labour intensive for the two neurosurgeons.

As well as his clinical work he maintained his interest and expertise in neuropathology by consulting over all the surgical specimens with the hospital pathologist.

He visited the New Guinea highlands in December 1957 as a member of a University of Adelaide group investigating Kuru, the progressive neurodegenerative disorder common at that time among the Fore people. He revisited the area in January 1959 and developed a close and enduring friendship with D. Carlton Gajdusek, who was awarded the Nobel Prize for physiology for his work in defining prion disease.

Donald worked for a time at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital. He was appointed Director of Paediatric Neurosurgery at the Adelaide Children's Hospital (later the Women's and Children's Hospital) in 1970, continuing there until he retired in 1985. He was appointed Clinical Reader in the department of Paediatrics at the University of Adelaide in 1982 and Clinical Professor in 1987.

In 1975 Donald organised an appointment for me in paediatric neurosurgery at the Hospital for Sick Children Great Ormond Street London.

He and I met in Lambs Conduit near Great Ormond Street and bought a bottle of wine. It was a fine day so we found a bench in nearby Coram's Field and shared the bottle in its paper bag.

This established for me a fine relationship of formal informality. Perhaps it was a ceremonial initiation into paediatric neurosurgery and certainly a sign of a bond which continued through our subsequent association at the Adelaide Children's Hospital and beyond - although we never repeated the ceremony.

He was a key collaborator with Professor David J. David in establishing a Craniofacial unit at the Royal Adelaide Hospital and Adelaide Children's Hospital and with Professor Jack McLean at the (then) Road Accident Research Unit particularly on crash helmets and the neuropathology of brain injury.

He resigned from the Women's and Children's Hospital in 1985 and took up a part-time position in the NH &MRC Road Accident Research Unit as Senior Research Associate.

For many years he conducted weekly multidisciplinary head injury meetings at the Royal Adelaide Hospital.

He continued in part-time public and private neurosurgical practice until 1992.

The Neurosurgical Research Foundation, established by Jim Dinning with Donald as a foundation member and Chairman from 1994 to 2004, grew under their guidance from a small organisation to a highly successful research resource funding internationally recognised research and two professorial chairs.

The success of the Foundation, to which Donald and his family were significant benefactors, was a further fulfilment of the vision of Jim Dinning and Donald for neurosurgery in South Australia and gave Donald great satisfaction.

Donald Simpson's contributions to neurosurgery, particularly in paediatric neurosurgery and neurotrauma, in Adelaide, Australia and internationally have been considerable.

He was a member of the Neurosurgical Society of Australasia (NSA) from 1964; Secretary from 1969 to 1973, and President from 1973 to 1975. He was also the curator of the NSA museum of surgical instruments for many years.

His roles in the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons (RACS) included member and chairman of the Surgical Board (Neurosurgery) from 1975 to 1982; member of the Court of Examiners from 1977 to 1986; member of the National Road Trauma Committee, (representing the NSA) from 1986; convener

and foundation member of the Section of the History of Surgery and Anaesthesia, now the Section of Surgical History, from 1987.

He was a Foundation Fellow (1980) of the Australian College of Rehabilitation Medicine and a member of numerous national working parties and committees particularly related to head injury.

Internationally he was a member of the International Society for Paediatric Neurosurgery from 1973 being President from 1985 to 1986, and a member of the Society for Research into Hydrocephalus and Spina Bifida from 1970.

In South Australia he was a Life Member and Patron of the Spina Bifida Association of South Australia; chairman of the South Australian Executive Committee of the Australian Brain Foundation until 1985 and Patron of the Head Injury Society of South Australia.

For these many significant contributions he was rewarded by the NSA as the Honoured Guest and Lecturer in 1997 and the Jamieson medallist and lecturer in 2003 and by RACS with a Medal for Service in 1988, an Award for Excellence in Surgery in 2002 and the inaugural Sir Henry Newland Award in 2013. He received the President's Service Award from the Australian Council for Rehabilitation of the Disabled in 1984.

He was awarded by the University of Adelaide with a Doctorate of the University in 1985 and by the nation, appointed Member of the Order of Australia in 1980 for services to handicapped Children, and Officer of the Order of Australia in 2004 for services to medicine in neurosurgery and neurotrauma, as a researcher and academic.

He was invited to give numerous named lectures by RACS and the NSA. The NSA honoured him as the Honoured Guest lecturer in 1997 and the Jamieson lecturer in 2003.

His lectures were always marked by deep learning and a captivating and unique style.

He was the co-author and co-editor of two books and the author or co-author of approximately 165 papers and several book chapters.

Donald worked and taught at the Cho-Ray Hospital Saigon for some months during the Vietnam War in 1972 and 1973.

He had a great affection for Vietnam, its people, the country and its history.

He was the first President of the Indo-China Refugee Association established in 1975 (now the Australian Refugee Association) and he maintained this connection thereafter.

He convened with the NSA several combined Australasian and Vietnamese neurosurgical meetings. These meetings brought together for the first time neurosurgeons from the north and south and led to the formation of the Vietnam Neurosurgical Society which, with the support of the NSA, was able to join the World Federation of Neurosurgical Societies. Donald was made an honorary member of the Vietnam Neurosurgical Society in appreciation for his role in its formation. He developed and maintained long and much valued friendships with several senior Vietnamese neurosurgeons.

After the last of these Vietnam meetings in 1999 Donald and the Australasian participants visited the Champa temples near Da Nang. Donald of course knew much more about the extensive Champa civilisation than the Vietnamese guide whom he was able to assist with courtesy and discretion.

Apart from this remarkable history of service to his profession there were many other aspects which

went to the heart of Donald as a person, to qualities that made him admired and valued by his colleagues and particularly by his patients.

His patients recognised him as someone who cared for them beyond the simple provision of a service. Indeed he was dedicated to the total care of each patient, to each child and their families. He thought about them, worried about them and was always available to them. He visited their homes.

His concern for children with spina bifida expressed his remarkable capacity for individual care and attention. With Dr Annabel Carney he established and conducted a multidisciplinary spina bifida clinic which was a model of its kind.

He inspired great loyalty from his staff, notably Ann Ingles his secretary and Valda Jones his theatre sister, both of whom worked for him at the Adelaide Children's Hospital for many years.

As brief acquaintance would demonstrate, Donald was a polymath with a remarkable memory and breadth of knowledge, combined with a nose for the arcane and bizarre, a whimsical humour and a most elegant turn of phrase.

I am sure he gained great pleasure from his fund of knowledge, although I am grateful to be able to say, he did not use it to humiliate the less well informed - or only in the most gentle way.

He could quote from Ecclesiastes to Beatrix Potter and it seemed, from most sources in between.

He could call on the wisdom of past authorities for guidance in critical situations. As the ticklish phase of an operation approached, he might seek support from the Chinese Story teller Kai Lung, quoting: "We will advance upon the enemy in the stealthy manner affected by a duck when crossing the swamp".

Perhaps these mellifluous cadences indicate why Kai Lung appealed to Donald.

One quality in which he did acknowledge himself deficient was the appreciation of music. He declared that he was tone deaf and could not pick God Save the Queen (except when people stood) from Waltzing Matilda.

This did not prevent him from knowing about music. A fund raiser for the Neurosurgical Research Foundation some years ago featured Schoenberg's Pierrot Lunaire, recognized by musicologists as a landmark in the history of atonality. Donald gave the vote of thanks to the soprano on behalf of the somewhat glazed audience, presenting a witty and detailed appreciation of the music, linking the poetry, Schoenberg and Berlin in the pre Great War years. As always with conviction, elegance and without a note.

Sport was not an activity which most people associated with Donald Simpson but his family informed me that he had indeed coxed a successful head of the river and was duly dunked. His son Matthew Simpson also offered a rather tenuous story of a medal, whereabouts uncertain, won at golf played at a golf club where Donald was secretary, in which role he awarded himself a handicap of 100. I can offer no corroborative evidence for the existence of such a club.

Donald did give great attention and support to Disability Sports. He was medical officer for the South Australian team, which included many of his patients, and accompanied them, in the team track suit, to their sporting competitions.

When they built their smaller and final residence Joanna, his wife, described it as their twilight home. Others might have seen it as a library with domestic facilities. Indeed Joanna described the shift in

terms of a library move, the boxing and labelling of their books as, for example, "Poetry M to P".

My wife and I took Donald some Pierre de Ronsard roses last year. Donald was able to provide a succinct extempore biographical note on the 16 century French poet admitting that he, Donald, had read only little of the poetry. This, he said, had really been Joanna's field.

Joanna was unquestionably a great support for him and her death in 2007, a deeply felt loss. Donald often said the neurosurgical wives needed to be special, to cope with the disruption to social and family life. Joanna clearly fulfilled this requirement. He acknowledged with regret, and as a cautionary note, that neurosurgery had prevented him from spending more time with his children whom he spoke of with affection and pride, but who seemed, he said, to have grown up too quickly.

Neurosurgery particularly during Donald's early career was indeed very time consuming.

Donald and Joanna did however entertain with verve. As a host Donald could modify the formal constraints of his clinical persona and positively scintillate with old world charm.

As his clinical duties decreased Donald expanded his interest in history, in particular medical history.

He completed a Diploma of Applied History in 1997. In 2000 he was awarded an MD for his thesis on the Adelaide Medical School 1885-1914. He was a founding member and patron of the Medical Heritage Society, a member of the Australian Society of the History of Medicine, the Centre for British Studies at the University of Adelaide, the Maritime History Society of Australia and the Australian Mining History Association.

He published 29 papers on medical history, most recently in 2013.

His last years were clearly burdensome to him. He suffered a series of minor strokes which limited him physically but not mentally. When he could no longer attend lunch with his colleagues or entertain with the cold collations prepared by his wonderful carer Angela McKay, he remained courteous, charming, widely interested in matters outside himself and minimally factual about his own physical state.

It has been a privilege for me to come to know this gifted man who touched the lives of many people - his family, friends, the adult patients and their families, the children and their parents to whom he listened and brought healing and comfort.

Over these many years he was a mentor, whom I could trust implicitly, a supporter and a friend. He was non-judgemental, discrete and a person of unquestioned integrity.

I was greatly attracted to his knowledge, wisdom, grace, humour and humility. Above all I experienced him as a good man - a goodness which, when one meets it, raises the possibility that there may be such goodness in oneself.

Donald Simpson is survived by three children and four grandchildren.

This obituary was kindly provided by Professor Peter Reilly AO, University of Adelaide

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Simpson D. The recurrence of intracranial meningiomas after surgical treatment. J Neurol Neurosurg Psychiatry. 1957;20:22-39.

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