

A/Prof. John Douglas Yeo AO MB.MS DPRM FRACS FAFRM(RACP)
1933-2023
A great and truly humble man.

The following are my recollections of my privileged journey shared with John starting when I was a medical student.

John was born in Dubbo, schooled at North Sydney Boys High, and graduated in Medicine from the University of Sydney in 1956. He spent some time at the Royal Children's Hospital at Camperdown in paediatrics, followed by three years general surgery in England and Canada, mainly in orthopaedics and urology.

Returning to Australia, John married Joy Simmons 60 years ago and for their first 3 years of marriage John was the sole doctor in Pambula NSW where he performed emergency surgeries including 10 caesarean sections, often giving the the anaesthetic and cross-matching the blood.

In 1965, he accepted a Senior Registrar position in spinal injuries at Royal North Shore Hospital. The Acute Spinal Unit was housed in a couple of timber cottages where the injured, mostly young, spent 6 weeks on their backs on mattress blocks being lifted 2-3 hourly by a team of nurses and wardsmen waiting for the fractures to heal. The prevention at this stage was to minimise the risks of the common sequelae of pressure sores and bladder and kidney complication which were the main killers, not to mention fatal pulmonary embolism.

Then, as there was no recovery in the main, the goals were to gain as much independence using a wheelchair for mobility and manage the neuropathic bladder and bowel dysfunction. This was truly multidimensional rehabilitation and it required a team that John gradually gathered together.

He strove to better the outcomes for his patients and in 1967, he obtained a Winston Churchill Memorial Trust Scholarship to study advances in the treatment of paraplegia and quadriplegia in the USA, Canada, Europe, the UK and Israel.

He was appointed Director of the Spinal Injuries Unit in 1968. As a medical student I was in awe of John's compassion and empathy for those patients under his care. My journey with John as my mentor and leader began in 1972 when I became his registrar.

John became passionate about prevention at many levels – prevention of the injuries occurring, prevention of the cascade of neurological damage to the injured spinal cord in the hours after injury, prevention of the early complications and prevention of the long term complications that are lifelong for a person with permanent spinal cord injury.

John founded the Spinal Research Foundation in 1976 and campaigned for funding. His research into 'the cure' was literally on the sheep's back and led to introduction of hyperbaric oxygen to moderate the acute cord damage.

He established an Awareness and Prevention program with a team of inspiring spinal cord injured individuals who spoke at schools to raise awareness of injury prevention measures. These SCI ambassadors also raised awareness of living with spinal cord injury and the barriers as well as ability despite disability.

John focussed his research on rehabilitation of people with spinal cord injuries and was involved in the development of various devices, including the Russell Extrication Device for patients suspected of having spinal injuries.

He consulted with NSW Rugby League on injury prevention and assisted in altering the rules in Australian Rugby Union to help reduce the incidence of spinal injuries, treating many high-profile sports people along the way.

In 1988 he also became Medical Director of the Moorong Spinal Unit, Royal Rehabilitation Centre at Ryde. A highlight from his time at Moorong was hosting a visit by Princess Diana, charming her with his warmth and dedication to his profession.

John has seen more than 3000 patients over his career, many with spinal cord injuries sustained from car, motorcycle or sporting accidents.

John's lifelong quest was to find a cure for spinal injuries. Recently he was delighted to support Churchill Fellow, Marc Ruitenberg, who is building on John's previous research. John was so excited about the possibility that finding a cure could be within a generation.

John and I have been privileged to meet so many extraordinary people living with spinal cord injury. I am grateful to have had him as a colleague and friend for over 50 years.

There is much more that should be and has been said about this amazing man:

https://www.churchilltrust.com.au/news_item/remembering-a-legend-dr-john-teo-treating-spinal-injuries/

https://www.sydney.edu.au/medicine/museum/mwmuseum/index.php/Yeo,_John_Douglas

<https://fas.org.au/dr-john-yeo-a-life-well-lived/>

<https://www.iscos.org.uk//spotlight-on-john-yeo>

https://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/bitstream/handle/2123/25070/Carter%20Jones_HMMoranPrize.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y