

# The Health of Pacific Societies

## IAN PRIOR'S LIFE AND WORK



A celebration at Wellington School of Medicine  
25 February 2000



## Reflecting and looking forward

Ian Prior

**I** GREATLY APPRECIATE the opportunity to give my thanks to Wellington Hospital and the Wellington School of Medicine and their staff for the remarkable measure of patient support they have given me since I started as a house surgeon on 1 January 1946 up until the present time.

For me it has been a moving afternoon of presentations that make it clear to me that I have been very fortunate in the quality and productivity of the people I have worked with over the years.

I would like to thank Philippa Howden-Chapman, Alistair Woodward and Robert Beaglehole for developing the idea of a 'look back, look forward and review' function — such a celebration can be rather awesome to contemplate but in fact I have found it an unusual and joyous occasion. It has made me resolve to keep on working in areas that I enjoy and feel I can make a worthwhile contribution.

It is most rewarding that so many colleagues, friends and family have been able to attend.

Particular thanks to Al Wessen, Beth and granddaughter Gia for coming from Providence Rhode Island to review some aspects of the Tokelau Island migrant study.

Al and Marg Wessen were part of our Tokelau team over a number of years and were the driving force in editing the book *Migration and Health*

*in a Small Society — The Case of Tokelau* published by the Oxford University Press. We owe them sincere gratitude for their work — without them the edition would have remained unborn.

The papers by Tony Hooper and Judith Huntsman were outstanding and they continue to produce important work including a monograph of *Tokelau — A Historical Ethnography*, published by Auckland University Press 1996. They have also helped young Tokelauans pursue and gain academic training that has given them skills for working with Tokelauan communities in Tokelau and in New Zealand.

The continuation of the Tokelau project has been assured by the work on housing and health that Philippa Howden-Chapman, Gina Pene and others from the Department of Public Health are undertaking. This is good and will take advantage of the extraordinary database of Tokelau individuals and houses that is being maintained and which will allow further specific studies to be undertaken.

An outcome of this celebration has been an agreement that there should be meetings to explore what further work could be done to the advantage of the Tokelau community in New Zealand and Tokelau and at the same time to extend scientific knowledge about the process and outcomes of migration.

The Department of Public Health, Wellington School of Medicine would be in a unique position to help coordinate and to take a lead in such developments.

## Where have I come from and where am I going?

As a fourth year medical student from a medical family in Masterton I was introduced in 1943, on a Dunedin tram by a dear friend Norrie Rogers, to a beautiful young woman in army uniform — Elespie Forsyth. We were married on 14 March 1946. Fifty-four years later she continues to be an extraordinarily tolerant, kind and good wife, mother and grandmother. I did not know then the linkages that would be developed through our two families and how these genes and contrasting backgrounds and resources would contribute to our place in New Zealand and the Pacific.

In 1860, my great-grandfather, the Reverend Fordham, was with his wife a Methodist missionary in Fiji. Some years later my grandfather Samuel Fordham Prior was also a Methodist minister serving in Invercargill,



Masterton and at Pitt Street Church in Auckland. He played an important role in the church's development in New Zealand. My father Norman Prior was dux at Auckland Grammar and did his first three years of medicine at Otago Medical School.

I have no doubt that I inherited my strong sense of social equity and justice from my Methodist background, together with my strong feeling of responsibility towards the Pacific and its people.

Elespie's great-grandfather Bendix Hallenstein came to New Zealand from Hanover in Germany in 1863 and with his two brothers developed a store in Queenstown. He then shifted to Dunedin where in 1873 he developed the clothing factory and the firm Hallenstein Brothers and the Drapery & Importing Company — the DIC.

He was described as a man of ceaselessly fertile mind who was not only a very successful businessman but he served as representative on the Otago Provincial Council and was a member of parliament for Otago. He greatly enhanced Dunedin's reputation for social philanthropy and leadership in arts and education through his personal initiatives.

Bendix Hallenstein also helped with the development of the first union in New Zealand to improve the working conditions of women working in the clothing trade: the Dunedin Tailoresses' Union in 1889.

He was joined in Dunedin in 1888 by Willi Fels from Brunswick in Germany, who married his daughter Sarah and helped with the further development of Hallenstein Brothers as a major chain store throughout the country. Willi Fels also played an important part in cultural developments in Dunedin city, including the Otago Museum. He developed one of New Zealand's most notable private collections of Maori art and other material, much of which he left to the Otago Museum on his death.

Willi Fels' second daughter Emily was Elespie's mother, a highly intelligent woman with a strong social sense and a love of the arts. The family — which included Elespie's cousin Charles Brasch, the poet and *Landfall* founder and editor for 25 years — showed many strengths in the arts and literature.

Other family benefactors included the de Beers, who made major bequests to Dunedin including to the Art Gallery, the Hocken Library and to the Otago Museum.

High standards in business, and support of New Zealand in many directions including encouraging developments in the arts, literature and music have been part of the family tradition.

My father Norman Prior qualified MBChB in Edinburgh in 1908 after doing his first three years in Dunedin. He commenced general practice in Masterton in 1909. He has been an important source of inspiration to me, my brothers and to others in the family, as a very good general practitioner and role model. Aided by my mother Jessie Prior, he gave a high degree of positive Methodist service to the community. Both my parents had a strong social sense and loyalty towards New Zealand.

My younger brother Owen carried on the practice in Masterton and has had a distinguished career as a general practitioner and surgeon with involvement in a wide range of community endeavours. The practice is now being very effectively conducted by his son Simon — this means there has been a Prior in the practice for 91 years.

Our elder brother Arthur (1914–69) was undoubtedly a most creative and lucid thinker who was one of the key people who developed the discipline of formal logic. At the time of his premature death at 55 years he was Fellow at Balliol and had been made a Fellow of the British Academy. He was described as a brilliant teacher.

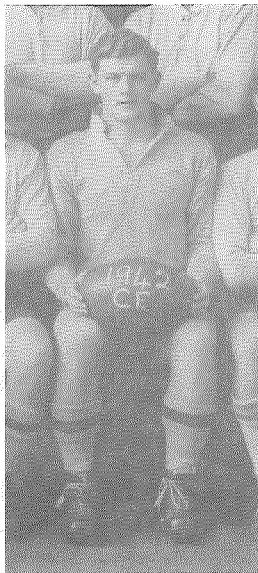
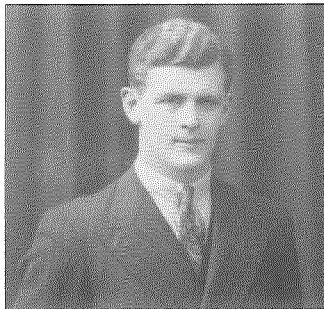
"He had a great intellectual purity, he cared simply for the truth of an idea and not at all about the authority or fashionableness of the person who proposed it. He paid as much attention to the ideas of his first-year graduates, if they were good ones, as to anything in Aristotle or Russell." [Anthony Kenny, *Proceedings of the British Academy Vol LVI*]

I have put in this short comment about Arthur because as a family we are very proud of him and his extraordinary contribution to his field of philosophy and knowledge. I think we must all gain strength from our family members when we can as well as from other sources, including our friends.

Norman Prior was a modest, thoughtful man. Growing up we did not know that he had won the MC and Bar in the First World War for extreme bravery under fire, bringing in wounded. He told us nothing of this and of the life in the trenches of Passchendaele. He was very keen on the strengths of the church and the community and on the virtues of exercise and healthy living. He and his friends were much involved in the early 1930s in the No



THE NZ ARMY RUGBY TEAM, 1943. MIDDLE ROW, SECOND FROM LEFT, JOHNNY SMITH; FOURTH FROM LEFT, IAN PRIOR; AT RIGHT IS TEAM MANAGER WINSTON MCCARTHY, WHO WENT ON TO BECOME A LEGENDARY COMMENTATOR. FRONT ROW CENTRE, ALL BLACK ERIC TINDILL. SEATED ON THE GROUND IS ANOTHER RENOWNED ALL BLACK, 'DOC' PAEWAI. IAN ALSO CAPTAINED OTAGO UNIVERSITY (RIGHT) AND PROVINCE, AND MADE THE SOUTH ISLAND TEAM, BEFORE HANGING UP HIS BOOTS IN FAVOUR OF CAREER AND FAMILY. BELOW: ON THE KNOX COLLEGE STUDENTS CLUB EXECUTIVE, 1943.



Licence movement and efforts to keep demon drink and those places that were selling it out of Masterton.

Golf and bowls were important to both my parents and they certainly shared the trials and tribulations of their golf rounds and bowls encounters at family meals.

My father had several sayings which have been of value to me:

*~ When in doubt, do the courageous thing ~*

*~ Of those to whom much is given, much is expected ~*

*~ Don't let the bastards get you down ~*

Things I've been involved with over the years have been greatly helped by Elespie and have reflected the backgrounds I have detailed from our two families and how we have worked together.



A love of the arts in their various forms, and a commitment to service to the smaller and larger institutions and communities that I have been involved with, stand out as being of importance to us both and have influenced my growth as a person.

The role played by my moving from clinical medicine into epidemiology has been of great importance.

My training as a physician and cardiologist and my recognition that you had to try and listen to people meant that when we were starting to plan our early studies in Maori communities, such as among Tuhoe in Ruatahuna in the Urewera in 1960 and among

ON THE TASMAN GLACIER 1967

— A GOOD PLACE TO RELAX AND THINK

Ngati Porou at Tikitiki in 1962, we realised that they had to be community studies that offered quality medical examinations of both adults and children as part of the study.

We were quite clear that we had to collect the best data we could about medical history, diabetes, gout, body build, smoking history and alcohol use for the adults, and asthma and allergy in the young people. We learnt that you had to work with tribal committees and make it clear what follow-up and feedback would be provided.

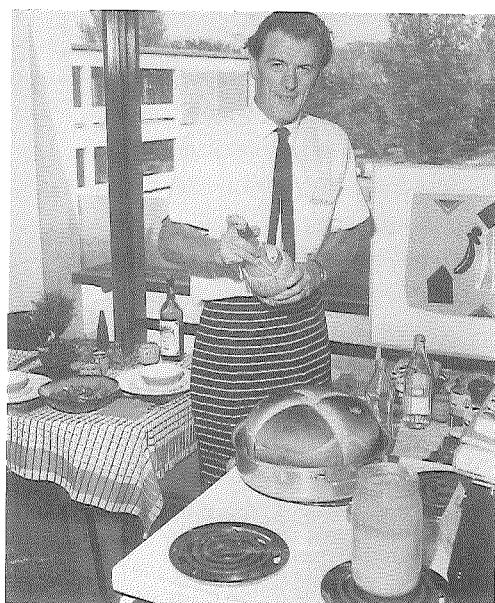
This contrasted with the major international epidemiological studies being undertaken in the 1960s and 1970s which were testing specific hypotheses in limited age groups — eg males aged 40–59 relating to cholesterol levels, diet and coronary heart disease. These groups excluded females altogether.

It was good to hear Neil Pearce's comments about the important example our studies have given in their concentration on health in communities in men and women, and not just men from 49–59 or similar restricted age groups.

I have been fortunate through my involvement in epidemiological research to have had major involvement not only in Maori communities but also in a number of Pacific countries and in particular Tokelauans in

Tokelau and New Zealand. This study and involvement has been one of the most rewarding parts of my scientific and community activities.

I learnt early in my career that one must ask for help in order to carry out a particular project, particularly epidemiological studies. On this occasion I will mention John Rangihau and John McCreary helping with our Maori



AT A MEDICAL CONFERENCE WHERE PARTICIPANTS HAD A CHANCE TO DISCUSS A PERSONAL INTEREST — I CHOSE COOKING AND FOOD.

studies and also Ancel Keys, Fred Epstein and John Cassel with our Pacific studies.

John Cassel, a highly skilled epidemiologist from Chapel Hill, was truly a master conceptual thinker. He helped greatly with the Tokelau Island migrant study as it was developing from 1970 on. He also arranged for the Epidemiology Unit to collaborate in a study in Ponape, Eastern Caroline Islands, examining hypotheses relating to the effects of modernisation.

Others like Robert Beaglehole, Flora Davidson (our very competent nutritionist), Margaret Neave, Cara Fleming, and Shirley Tonkin in charge of children's studies, John Stanhope, Sitaleki Finau, Tony Hooper, Judith Huntsman and Al Wessen, who with his wife Marg did a superb job of editing the Tokelau monograph, already referred to.

I believe there is a growing and important part for epidemiology to play in future health studies in New Zealand and the Pacific.

Keith Sinclair in his autobiography quotes Dan Davin saying that being old is a bugger, but adds that it's great fun getting there. Dealing with problems and stresses and ill health is part of the bugger that most of us have to face and cope with at some stage of our lives. I would endorse that, as I have been blessed with a genetic constitution that encourages the development of bipolar affective disorder or manic depression — coping and surviving certainly can be a bugger.

I have survived this with the help of many different people who have steered me through the troublesome periods of the down side and helped me manage the up phases and continue to set goals and help me work to achieve them.

I would end by saying how important Elespie has been in my life, having confidence when I had lost mine and also giving me strengths in a joyous host of other ways.

The support and optimism of our three daughters, Bettina, Susan and Ione and their families has been of great help to me and has helped keep the family together.



IAN & ELESPIE'S DAUGHTER IONE WITH GRANDDAUGHTER MEREANA.



I shall end with a quote from Wordsworth.

*My heart leaps up when I behold*

*A rainbow in the sky*

*So was it when my life began*

*So it is now I am a man:*

*So be it when I shall grow old*

*or let me die*

*The Child is Father of the man*

*And I could wish my days to be*

*Bound each to each by natural piety.*

I thank you all for your participation in this day of looking back and looking forward to future work that can be done in New Zealand and the Pacific. There is much to be done, but remember to involve the local people in asking the scientific questions and planning the projects to obtain the data and setting up the studies to seek answers to the questions.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A publication such as this has only been possible because of the support and encouragement from many institutions, organisations and people.

The Medical Unit and the Epidemiology Unit have been greatly helped in many ways. It is appropriate to pay tribute to some landmark people in this book as a token of respect and thanks.

— Dr Douglas Kennedy, Director General of Health and Dr Caleb Tucker, Superintendent in Chief, both of whom in 1970 agreed that the Health Department and Wellington Hospital Board should support an academic epidemiology unit within Wellington Hospital and meet the salary of the director, a secretary and biochemist. Ms Flora Davidson, senior nutrition adviser in the Health Department, made an outstanding contribution both in the fieldwork and the analysis of the studies.

— Dr Kenneth Newell and Dr Zdenic Fejfar of the World Health Organisation: These men arranged a major meeting on cardiovascular epidemiology in the Pacific in 1970 which set the scientific direction of the Tokelauan Island Migrant Study on to a firm pathway. They also provided consultants including Professor Al Wessen of Brown University, Providence, USA. Professor Wessen went on to play a major role in the

project including editing the definitive Oxford Press publication *Migration and Health in a Small Society: The Case of Tokelau*.

— Dr Jim Hodge, Director of the Medical Research Council (1968–91), who for many years was a valued member of the Tokelau Research Committee and who was extremely helpful throughout.

It is also important to acknowledge the people who created the occasion that led to this book, and the book itself. First, Philippa Howden-Chapman and Alistair Woodward for initiating the festschrift (tribute) and undertaking the editing. To the speakers who graciously participated, thank you. To Helen Smyth who helped sort out the bibliography, and finally, to Roger Steele of Steele Roberts publishers and Lynn Peck of Central Media, thank you for your contributions. The support of the Willi Fels Memorial Trust is also gratefully acknowledged.

*Ian Prior*



ELESPIE WITH THE PRIOR'S ELDEST DAUGHTER, BETTINA.