A leader in the field of public health

Dominion Post 26/3/09

Ian Ambury Miller Prior, doctor, activist, philanthropist: B Masterton, October 16, 1923; m 1946 Elespie Forsyth, 3d; d Wellington, February 17, 2009, aged 85.

IAN PRIOR, of Wadestown, spent his working life in the public arena in a career in which medicine, activism and philanthropy intertwined.

A physician specialising in cardiology, he gravitated to public health in the widest sense while managing to have significant roles in community work.

He was an environmentalist when the term had barely surfaced; he was avowedly anti-racist when assimilation was the prevalent middle-ground view; and he believed beautiful art, literature and music to have potential health-giving properties when to admit liking any of them was to risk being branded a pansy.

What made Dr Prior noteable was his capacity for getting things done. It is an attribute that brought him to the attention of the medical profession, obliged political authorities to revise decisions, and in creative ventures earned the gratitude of artists, musicians, composers and writers.

His primary interest was in public health. He pioneered intensive research on the health of entire communities, beginning with Maori in the Uruwera and on the East Coast, and then in communities in the Pacific and Australia.

These groundbreaking studies were not short-term flash-in-the-pan checkups. Epidemiology, as the field is known, is a cornerstone of public health research. It is the basis on which Dr Prior and the people who worked with him were able to reach conclusions about why so many New Zealanders are, among other things, prone to obesity, get gout in astonishing numbers and develop diabetes more readily than they once did.

By 1960, statistics had already revealed that Maori, for example, were victims of diabetes in numbers hitherto undetected and that they were dying in increasing numbers. Significantly, they were dying at a far greater rate than Europeans.

It was alarming, Dr Prior said, but proof required greater accounting than mortality statistics. It was a mark of his exemplary manners and courtesy that he was able to get alongside Maori in the Uruwera country, for example.

Their connections with the European administration had been unpleasant to say the least. A white doctor asking personal questions was likely to be stonewalled but, after the intervention of John Rangihau, at the time a trainee social worker, Tuhoe agreed to help. The outcome, painstakingly documented over many years, was done under the auspices of the Wellington Hospital medical unit, of which Dr Prior was director. The findings showed that lives were increasingly fuelled on poor diets and that there was a prevalence of hypertension, diabetes and coronary disease.

Not all of it went swimmingly. Within senior echelons of the medical fraternity, there were doubts as to whether prodding Maori, checking their blood and measuring fat rolls constituted real research.

Even the Medical Research Council at the time would not give Dr Prior and his workers the stamp of approval. In the end they did, but only after Dr Prior authored a flood of learned papers, and had them published abroad. The work earned international recognition, and the gratitude of Polynesian communities.

He turned his attention to the Pacific after the Maori field work, and found that many Islanders in New Zealand no longer resembled their ancestors. Once lean and powerful, they had become too fat because of dietary changes, with high levels of coronary disease, hypertension and diabetes.

The Wadestown doctor, however, was not one to rest on his laurels; he knew that the early findings would require constant attention to ensure the dietary habit message was reinforced every day. "You could slash the cost of public health to a fraction of its present levels if people ate sensibly," he said.

Until old age imposed physical limits ("I've had better times than this, you know," he groused in November), Dr Prior was the picture of good health.

Tall, lean and handsome, he was a good advertisement for healthy living. He was a capable skier, and as a student played rugby in representative teams for Otago and in a North-South fixture.

He was not a stuffed-shirt careerist. He was a plain-speaking son of mindful Masterton Methodists. His homemaker mother and GP father were temperance adherents who paid attention to current affairs and the shape of New Zealand society.

As a youngster, he would have preferred a career as a shepherd until his father steered him towards academia. He was a product of Wairarapa College, and went to Dunedin, where he enrolled in medical studies at Otago University. It came as no surprise to him, after a year in Dunedin, that he had lost a $100 wager with his father that he would not allow alcohol to pass his lips.

Ahead of his time: Dr Ian Prior embraced environmentalism and anti-racism well before it was popular to. Photo: ROBERT KITCHIN

He graduated in 1946, was a house surgeon at Wellington Hospital, then registrar at New Plymouth Hospital and a pathology lecturer at the Otago Medical School. He worked and studied for higher qualifications in Britain, returning to Wellington in 1954. He was a Fulbright scholar in Boston for two years from 1957, returning two years later to head the medical unit at Wellington Hospital. He retired in 1988.

Dr Prior credited his community interests to an important influence, which had its genesis on a Dunedin tram in 1943. Elespie Forsyth, whom he would marry in 1946, was a passenger on the tram.

She wore a greatcoat over her women's auxiliary army uniform, and clutched a posy of violets. Dr Prior remembered the meeting all his life. She was, he said, the most beautiful woman he'd seen.

ELESPIE FORSYTH was special. He learned soon enough that she was of independent means (her great-grandfather was Bendix Hallenstein, founder of Hallenstein Brothers and of the DIC, and her grandfather was Willi Fels, Hallenstein's right-hand man).

She had been raised in a family circle in which ideas, talking and talents were nurtured in equal measure. Women were encouraged to think for themselves and make useful choices of their own.

His future wife was an outdoorsy type with a fresh mind and well-constructed opinions of her own.

Dr Prior wrote that he had never heard anyone talk about art as well as this young woman and her friends. He learned quickly that she and her wide circle would nourish his growing interests in the arts, and sustain it.

He was not shy about making his views known, and he was not afraid to get offside with important figures.

He addressed a meeting at Newtown in 1976 called to protest against dawn raids, a mechanism sanctioned by the Muldoon government to extract overstayers from their homes and deport them. He was bitterly opposed to it, and to the divisions the raids created.

Among other things, he was – with his wife – a driver of the Save Manapouri campaign, which succeeded in preventing the Crown from raising the level of the lake by some eight metres to generate electricity for the Bluff smelter.

Also with his wife, he took on Queenstown authorities who wanted to hand Bendix Hallenstein's gift of a public park to an international hotel chain.

He was involved with the Halt All Racist Tours movement in the leadup to the 1981 Springbok tour. In that year he was co-founder of the New Zealand branch of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War. The organisation won a Nobel Prize for peace in 1985.

In 1982, Dr Prior and Henry Lang, a former secretary of the Treasury, established the Wellington Sculpture Trust. To date, the trust has raised funds and been associated with five sculptures in the Botanic Gardens, 12 in downtown sites and four on Cobham Drive.

The generosity of Ian and Elespie Prior is not well known. The Willi Fels Trust has been the vehicle for several of their philanthropic projects. A tiny credit line in a programme note or a brief word at an opening soiree is the preferred public acknowledgment.

Dr Prior was made an officer of the New Zealand Order of Merit in 1996, and was awarded an honorary doctorate of science by Victoria University in 1988.

His wife died in 2002. They are survived by their three daughters and their families. – *By Peter Kitchin*