

Memoirs and biographies

LIGHT AIRS

WITH RETIREMENT looming large on the horizon I can only look back and wonder if it's worth gathering up and writing one doctor's life experience.

Years pass like an ocean crossing with weather both fair and foul. Is there any point in logging this voyage, its hopes and dreams and to say what actually happened in the life and times of an individual?

Biographies about some doctors' lives are inspirational and heroic. Considering we all belong to the medical family, how the stories differ!

Consider this one. Dr Dominique Jean Larrey was surgeon to Napoleon's Imperial Guard. He left a jumbled and unpublished memoir, but in 1957 writer Robert G. Richardson gathered this with other sources to write the career of this great doctor, now largely forgotten.



Since cannons and fire-arms were introduced to warfare in the 18th century, the casualty rate underwent geometric escalation from hundreds to tens of thousands. Wounded soldiers who could not keep up were mostly just left behind.

Larrey changed that culture. He was the pioneer in First Aid and evacuations from the front line and established 'the flying ambulance,' horse drawn of course. It was all very difficult as the Emperor did not consider this work very important in 'Le Grande Armee,' capriciously giving his doctor the bureaucratic runaround with funding cuts.

In spite of these difficulties, his ethical approach was to treat casualties on the basis of their wounds rather than on rank or nationality. He was so respected that the Duke of Wellington ordered his soldiers not to shoot at Larrey.

At the battle of Borodino in 1812 between France and Russia, he single-handedly performed 200 amputations in 24 hours. 'This remains a record which will never be broken,' according to Richardson.

Larrey was so revered that in the middle of one terrible battle when he was in danger, a cry went up, 'It is Monsieur Larrey. He must be saved!' The cry was taken up, 'Save him who saved us,' and he was carried across the heads of soldiers to safety.

Working towards the Australia Day deadline for GPSpeak makes me think about great Australian doctors whose life work has been recorded either by self or biographer.

Dr Catherine Hamlin and her husband Reg trained at Prince Alfred Hospital in Sydney and went to Ethiopia as medical missionaries. They responded to a culture of immature child brides with genital tract fistulas from complications of obstructed labour. These girls were outcast from family and tribe due to subsequent dreadful faecal incontinence. These doctors developed surgical repair techniques for these young women, who would walk for miles to get to the famous hospital. They operated tirelessly and free of charge, relying on outside charity. This work has been recorded as an autobi-

ography called 'The Hospital by the River' with the help of John Little.

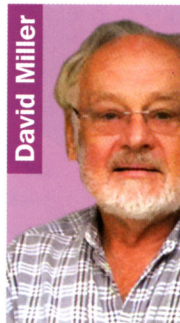
Another Australian Dr Fred Hollows presented as less of a saint. His biography was written by Peter Corris who said, 'He's as rough a diamond as they come.' Tom Kenneally called him 'the wild colonial boy of Australian surgery.' His purpose, as we all know, was to restore sight to many thousands with a simple low cost lens replacement procedure in Africa and Aboriginal Australia. Like Dr Larrey, his main opposition came from bean counters and bureaucracy.

These were some of our great ones. But what about the rest of us quietly working away in our practices?

How do we know if our lives have been worthwhile?

I recall a reflective workshop for doctors in Byron Bay where Dr Paul Earner who has served in our area for many years, said: 'The best way I know to help our patients is to walk next to them, like a friend.'

In essence, isn't this just what the great ones did?



David Miller

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