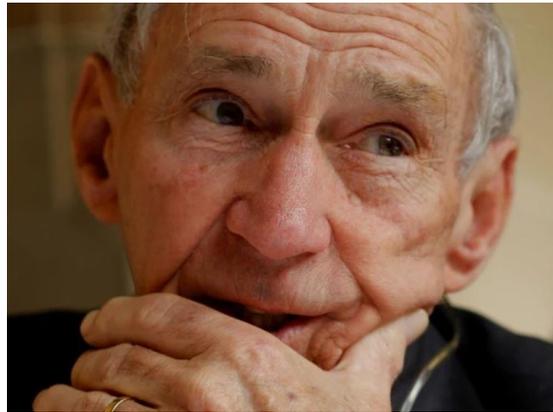


William (Bruce) Conolly

1935 – 2017



William Bruce Conolly was born in Molong, NSW, in February 1, 1935, son of a general practitioner, Dr William Conolly, founder of the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners, and Ruth (nee King). The young Conolly started his schooling at a one-teacher school and by correspondence before being sent to the Sydney Church of England Grammar School (Shore). In 1953, he enrolled as a medical student at Sydney University, staying at St Paul's College, and represented the university in tennis. Graduating in 1959, he spent three years in Britain training in surgery, including a period in the Derbyshire Hand Unit. In 1963 he became a member of the Royal College of Surgeons where he met a medical graduate, Joyce

Conolly and his bride travelled to the US. He became an assistant professor of surgery at the University of California and took up an appointment at the Columbia Presbyterian Medical Centre, New York. Returning to Sydney in 1969, he was appointed assistant honorary surgeon at Sydney Hospital. In 1972 he founded the Sydney Hospital Hand Unit. With two other hand surgery specialists he formed a hand unit at St Luke's Hospital, a private hospital in Potts Point. Conolly started writing, his first book on hand injuries and infections. By 1991 the Hand Unit at Sydney Hospital had 10 beds and doctors were performing 45 operations a month. Hand therapists were dealing with 430 cases a month.

In his 23 years as director of the Sydney Hospital Hand Unit, Conolly developed a multitude of hand surgery practices and techniques new to Australia. Perhaps his most extraordinary operation was on Paul Williams, born with eight fingers on his left hand. Conolly removed three of the fingers and turned one of the remaining digits into a thumb. The boy's overjoyed mother said of her son: "He can do everything but wash up."

But Conolly, inspired at least in part by the activities of Rotary Australia, was now looking much further afield. He asked why the millions in Asia had little or no access to any specialist specialities? Conolly went on to give surgical training and conduct clinical workshops in more than 25 countries. He was in the Peace Hospital in Baghdad during the Iran/Iraq war, and in wartime Bosnia. Indian surgeons referred him to many hospitals as a lecturer. He volunteered with Mother

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Teresa in the Mother House for the Dying and started an education project in Hue, Vietnam. In 2000, he began a long and loving relationship with the Burmese people. "There is no limit to what you can do," Bruce Conolly, hand surgeon, once said. "I've got to feel the need and I've got to like the people, or more importantly, they've got to like me. Because, then, you give everything." He was speaking specifically of the Burmese people, who had found a place in his heart. It was said that had he been able, he would have been simultaneously delivering medical care to those in the Middle East, Calcutta and Nigeria.

In 1991, Conolly was appointed Associate Professor of Hand Surgery at the University of New South Wales and pledged to raise the profile of his speciality due to the frequency of hand or upper limb injuries. "Basically the population is aware of heart disease and dramatic microsurgery and dramatic transplant operations, but many people and medical practitioners are unaware of the potential of modern hand surgery and therapy," he said. "As medical students and young doctors there has not been the same exposure to hand conditions ... even though a quarter to one-third of attendees at accident and emergency involve the hand or upper limb."

In 1992, Conolly was appointed Clinical Associate Professor of Surgery at Sydney University. The following year he was appointed a Member of the General Division of the Order of Australia. In 1995, when he stepped down as director of the Sydney Hospital Hand Unit, he began two years as president of the Hand Surgery Society of Australia. In 2007 Conolly was awarded the status of "Pioneer of Hand Surgery" by the International Federation of Hand Surgeons. A year later, he was awarded for excellence in surgery by the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons, and in 2011 became a clinical associate professor of hand surgery at Notre Dame University.

In 2013, Conolly founded the Myanmar Australia Conolly Foundation for Health, largely paying out of his own pocket to transport materials and courses, and he met Aung San Suu Kyi. He took up the case of refugees. On Australia's border policy, he said it was too tough. "Most people have no idea of the circumstances of life in the back of Baghdad, or Sri Lanka or anywhere else. I would take the risk and if it means that a lot of [economic refugees] come here, well, that's one of those things," he said. He suffered in his last year of life from mesothelioma. He gave his last lecture at a medical conference in Orange, NSW, last November flying there with wheelchair and oxygen. He died on February 21.

Bruce Conolly is survived by his widow, Joyce, and children John, Christine and Bruce.

Credit: Malcolm Brown. Bruce Conolly, a pioneer of hand surgery, March 27, 2017, Sydney Morning Herald