

Alfred Lewis
(February 1941- July 2014)



I was honoured to be invited to compose the obituary to my close colleague and dear friend, Alfred Lewis.

It soon became apparent that I, alone could not do justice to the life and antics of the multifaceted gregarious personality that was Alf. So it was no sense of embarrassment that I invoked the assistance of his family and friends, and even the man himself, to adequately document the life and times of a truly remarkable man.

Alf was born and raised in Wallsend, a suburb of Newcastle when the city was not much more than an overgrown mining town. He attended the local Primary School and went on to Newcastle Boys' High School, the premier selective school of the region. He completed the Leaving Certificate and won a Commonwealth Scholarship to study medicine at Sydney University, whence he graduated in 1964.

The characteristics that defined this gregarious fellow were already chronicled in the entry in his Final Year Book on graduation, where it is recorded that on arriving at Sydney University, Alf was heard to state, "Well, it's like this, mate!"

How many times have you, the reader, heard Alf make this very remark with his wicked chuckle and the inevitable belly laugh as he dispensed some sage advice or humorous anecdote?

After graduating, Alf spent two years at Sydney Hospital, followed by five years (1966-1971) as surgical registrar at RGH Concord. He achieved fellowship of the RACS in 1969.

Plastic Surgery attracted him, and Alf followed a well-developed pathway to specialist training in UK and USA. He worked at the Mount Vernon Hospital in Middlesex UK, under such luminaries as Dicky Dawson, Mirek Stranc, Noel Thompson and Stewart Harrison, followed by a fellowship in Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery at the University of New York Medical Center under John Converse.

On his return to Sydney in 1975, Alf was appointed to Concord Hospital, where he remained on staff until 1991, and Ryde District Hospital, close to his Eastwood practice, until 2001.

Alf and I commenced practice at the same time. We did not look disalike with our blond hair and reddish beards, sporting the obligatory blue Bermuda jackets in vogue at the time. We could, and indeed did, confuse many of our senior colleagues by exchanging name badges at society and college meetings. Our only distinguishing feature was my inability to emulate Alf's infectious belly laugh at his own inexhaustible array of jokes.

Alf developed a wide-ranging practice in Plastic Surgery, but after leaving the public hospital system he refined his practice to skin lesions and cosmetic surgery- for which he was respected as a safe and competent exponent of the art.

Alf had many facets to his life, with a profound knowledge and experience outside medicine, which is astounding in its depth and scope. He was a more than competent sailor and enjoyed small boat yachting- which by his own admission he indulged all too infrequently. He was widely read, with a particular interest in the fictional and non-fictional aspects of World War II.

His knowledge of food and wine was encyclopaedic. He would inevitably commandeer the wine list at a restaurant and regale the sommelier on the finer points of some obscure vintage from an out of the way vineyard in St Elsewhere's. None of his dining companions had the temerity nor the knowledge to contest him.

Alf's love of music was all encompassing and brought him comfort and solace in the last few difficult months of his illness. He played piano (poorly by his own modest assertion). He played percussion in the fledgling Australian Doctors' Orchestra when his trainee, protégé, colleague and life-long friend, Miklos Pohl, established it in 1993.

Alf and Miki met at Ryde Hospital in 1975, and found that they were to attend the same concert that same evening. Micky records that soon after, he and his string quartet were performing at Alf and Peta's home in Balmain. Thereafter followed an association through Miki's Orchestra and an Interplast teamwork that endured for more than twenty years.

Alf joined a journal club in 1975-started by Charles Sharpe and including Paul O'Keeffe, Cholm Williams, Allan Meares and John Briedis. This group met each month for almost thirty years and travelled overseas every alternate year. They called on many of the esteemed American aesthetic surgeons who later became visiting guests of the ASAPS, of which Alf was a founding member.

In those early days, when ASAPS was small and manageable, the annual meetings were held in small, but interesting venues. Since then, the membership has expanded to the size where only major cities have the resources to accommodate such a large group. Some might call this development progress.

In one such meeting, held at a modest boutique vineyard in the Barossa, Fred Grazer was invited to tell us all about this new fangled technique called "liposuction".

Accommodation was limited and as was inevitable at the time, it transpired that we were one room short. As ever, the urbane Alf Lewis stepped up to offer a solution to the problem and became famous as the only member ever to share a boudoir (sic) with Rosemary Swift.

If Alf's life was not sufficiently full, he recognized a sense of duty to his craft and became involved in medical politics. He served as chairman of the NSW Chapter of Plastic Surgeons in the late 1970's and later was

elected to the council of ASPS, where he ultimately assumed the presidency in 2002-3. This was a tumultuous period in the history of ASPS, with the devolution of the specialist societies from the tight control of the college, the assumption of the responsibility for registrar training by the society, the rebuff of the maxillo-facial surgeons from gaining a back-door access to our College and the lead up to the successful IPRAS meeting in Sydney in 2003.

Alf was a wise and popular leader and a sage contributor to the deliberations of the council he led. He is remembered by Donna Thompson (ASPS Executive Secretary at the time) as “a clear and decisive leader, a man of many interests and a teller of fine tales.” Alf sacrificed every Friday of his presidency, which he spent in the ASPS office, dealing with the issues he regarded as fundamental to the welfare of his colleagues and craft.

As his practice devolved from Ryde to the Hills District in Sydney, Alf turned his attention to the establishment of the Baulkham Hills Private Hospital, where he served as chairman of the Medical Advisory Committee for 18 years. He became involved in the Castle Hill Day Surgery Hospital, in which he was a shareholder, board member and chairman of the MAC.

At the time of his passing, Alf was intimately involved with the building and commissioning of a new facility in the Norwest Business Park- a doctor owned facility, with five theatres and six overnight beds which is scheduled to open in 2015, but unfortunately will not have Alf to serve as a guiding light.

Alf's personal life, by his own admission, was “a bit of a curate's egg.” Alf married Peta Tocher, a nurse at Sydney Hospital in 1965. He had two daughters, both of whom became architects. The generosity of the Lewis family led them to informally “adopt” two more girls in 1982.

Alf's personal life was something of a roller coaster and is best described in his own words, penned for his 50 year medical class reunion,
“My marriage has been at best unconventional with several dehiscences brought about by my own behaviour, the last for the past seven years. I live alone now at Cherrybrook, but retain a close and caring relationship with Peta and my children and grandchildren, of which I have four.”

Alfred Lewis was a true Renaissance man. born about 250 years too late. He was a knowledgeable fellow, a lover of people, a wit and raconteur, with a wicked sense of humour and a sophisticated and refined mind, and above all, the possessor of a raucous and infectious belly laugh that will be missed by all who knew and loved him.

Norman Olbourne – with contributions from Peta Lewis, Paul O'Keeffe, Miklos Pohl, Donna Thompson, SUMS Final Year Book 1964, and of course, Alfonse himself.