

President's Annual Report to the RCH Alumni: 2024

Garry Warne

An annual report marks the end of one year in the life of the Alumni community and the start of a new one, so it is a good time to reflect on who we are and what we would like to become. This is particularly relevant as we are about to vote on proposals to update our Constitution, which has served us well since 2016.

The Alumni that I joined in 2012 was, with few exceptions, exclusively medical and I think we had about 130 members, all former staff of the hospital. We now have 219 members and 20% of us are non-medical. While all our current members worked on the RCH campus, some of us were employed by the university and some by the Murdoch Children's. The RCH Alumni are loosely affiliated with the hospital, but we are separate and independent. We enjoy limited privileges at the hospital in that we have access to spaces for meetings without charge, have a page on the RCH website, and are invited to important events such as the Vernon Collins Oration and award presentations, but we are not part of the hospital's administrative structure. We do not have access to RCH legal services and are not indemnified by the hospital. The fact that we are not part of the hospital's administrative structure should provide comfort to anyone who might be hesitant about joining the Alumni. Regardless of anything that might have happened to them before retirement, they can relax once they are in the bosom of the Alumni and out of harm's way.

It is worth noting that very few other hospitals in Australia have an alumni association. Some look to us for inspiration. St Vincent's has one, which holds an annual cocktail party preceded by a historical lecture, and a golf day. They have more members than we do but are less cohesive and active than we are. They publish a newsletter comprised mainly of events and obituaries, a couple of times a year.

An important function of the Alumni is to provide continuing social connections, together with some intellectual stimulation, for people who worked together at RCH for many years. To this end we have done the following during 2024:

- (1) We have held three face-to-face lunchtime meetings, each with a guest speaker. Professor Nigel Curtis spoke to us about artificial intelligence, Associate Professor Jane Munro spoke about clinicians' health and wellbeing, and Professor Amy Gray (whose appointment as Stevenson Professor of Paediatrics has just been announced) told us how working in south-east Asia had made her a better paediatrician. Professor Sharon Goldfeld, this year's Vernon Collins Orator, spoke about the effectiveness of paediatrics in correcting child inequity. We are about to enjoy our annual Gala Lunch when intriguingly, Professor Mike South is going to entertain us with a dissertation on the judicious use of silliness and satire.
- (2) We have published two issues of our on-line periodical, Aluminations. This provides an outlet for the literary, photographic and artistic talents of members including some who live in other States or even other countries. It is widely distributed not only to our entire membership, but also through the MSA to current hospital staff, and to members of the hospital board.

- (3) Through our hard-working secretary, Christine Rodda, you receive regular updates by email about what is going on, particularly upcoming meetings and life events affecting members.
- (4) We have a fine Alumni home page on the RCH website, managed this year by Gigi Williams. It is full of interesting material including advance notices of forthcoming events, links to video recordings of talks, links to past and present issues of our newsletter, Aluminations, a photo gallery and personal profiles of many members. We commend it to you if you are not yet familiar with its contents. The url is <https://www.rch.org.au/alumni/>.
- (5) We have made a conscious effort this year to reach out to members who for whatever reason are shut in or have been prevented from attending meetings in person. Last year we commissioned former RCH artist Jocelyn Bell to design two special Alumni cards, one to mark significant birthdays, and a more general purpose one to be used when sending messages related to other important life events. These have been well received. We have also written to members who we know are unwell to let them and their carers know that we are thinking about them. The spirit of the message conveyed is “Are you OK?” Sometimes this has led to home visits being made. We would like to encourage and facilitate more support for our members who are not enjoying the best of health and for their care-givers.
- (6) We have given certain informal groups of members access to our Zoom account at no cost so that they can get together online for a regular chat.
- (7) Upon the death of a member, we publish an Alumni tribute in The Age death notices. Kevin Collins is the skilled wordsmith who has responsibility for composing our tributes.

A question we have is how many of our members would regard themselves as active members who participate in what we have to offer in some way, and how many would like us to help them become more active members? What kinds of activities would appeal to a greater number? We welcome any suggestions.

We are seeking better ways of recruiting of new members. We have asked Jill Sewell to lead this and to look for ways of communicating the benefits of Alumni membership to RCH campus staff who are planning to retire or have recently retired. MCRI staff are eligible to join, but to date very few have done so. We need to find ways of letting them know who we are and of developing activities that would be appealing to them. All ideas and suggestions would be welcome.

Your committee had discussions during the year about getting involved in recording the recent history of hospital departments because the official history written by Peter Yule only takes us up to the 1970s. While we saw merit in the proposal, it has not progressed because we lack resources and because we felt that writing history requires input from professional historians.

We have had the luxury of being able to hold lunchtime meetings in the RCH Foundation’s fundraising area for many years, but we will not be able to use this space in 2025 because they plan extensive renovations. We have had to look elsewhere and have decided to rent space at the Mercure Hotel on the corner across the road from the

hospital for three lunchtime meetings. There is some expense and contractual obligation involved in this, so we ask members to support meetings that will be held there.

Sadly four members died during the year and we remember them with fondness and respect:

Dr Jim Breheny OAM
Dr Ken Mountain
Mrs Helen Connelly
Professor Arthur Clark AM

On a happier note, our secretary, Christine Rodda, was made a Member in the Order of Australia (AM) in this year's King's Birthday honours. We congratulate her on this very fitting recognition of her contributions.

I have been wonderfully supported this year by an excellent committee: Caroline Clark, Vice-President, Christine Rodda, Secretary, George Werther, Treasurer, Ruth Wraith, Gigi Williams, Kevin Collins, Jim Wilkinson, Jill Sewell and Bronwyn Hewitt. Everyone has pitched in enthusiastically and in very good spirit. I could not be more grateful to them.

Ruth Wraith has announced her intention to step down to make room for someone younger. She has made an outstanding contribution, not only as a former President, but also by always being available to give wise counsel. Thank you, Ruth, for everything. We're glad that you want to be called upon to continue helping the committee.

Jim Wilkinson, our immediate Past President, is moving to Tasmania and is also leaving the Executive. Jim was a wonderful President and all-round tremendous contributor, to whom we are all very grateful. All the best for the big move, Jim and Helen.

George Werther, our Treasurer, is another person who is stepping down from the committee at this meeting. George has looked after our finances very well and has also been an excellent contributor in other ways. We thank him and wish him well.

The loss of three senior members of the committee means that there are opportunities for new people to come on board. We hope that some of our younger members will put their hands up. Please let someone know if you are interested.

And now we move on to the election of office bearers for 2025 and the vote on the proposed new constitution, which, if passed, will be the platform from which the next exciting phase of the Alumni adventure will be launched.

November 6th 2024