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Club President
Lyn McArthur

(H) 9367 6984
lynmac@primus.com.au

Area 3 Director
Dianne Bryant

9245 5551
diannebryant@hotmail.com

District 23 PR Chair
Nan Martella

9721 7067
martella@bigpond.net.au

Club Meetings

Second Thursday of the
month.

Apologies by 8pm

Previous Monday

To: Sharee Simm
0439 923 468

INZERT

Please send any articles
or photos for Inzert to:

Carole Theobald
theobald@powerdsl.com.au
8 Cormorant Cross
WILLETTON WA 6155

Burning ambition

by Catherine Madden

The following article, about our local Australian of the Year, is reproduced with the kind permission of the Science Network WA at <http://www.sciencewa.net.au>—it's a great site and subscription is free. Ed.

WHEN she was a young, athletics-obsessed schoolgirl, Fiona Wood's father told her: "You never win a race on your last performance." His daughter hasn't stopped running since.

At just 47, Dr Wood's CV reveals a dynamic career, crowded with recognition for her work as a plastic surgeon, the head of Royal Perth Hospital's renowned burns unit, a medical researcher and company director.

In January the mother of six was made Australian of the Year. Most recently she and colleague Marie Stoner received an Australian Technology Achievement Award for their pioneering work on skin repair, using spray-on skin cells used to treat burns and scarring that is now being exported to hospitals in Europe, the UK and Asia.

The company that she and Ms Stoner co-founded, Clinical Cell Culture (C3), is now worth tens of millions of dollars – which is channeled back into research – but it was treating the Bali bombings victims in October 2002 that first thrust Dr Wood into the public spotlight.

"All of a sudden [after the Bali bombing] the window opened to my world and people wanted to know about it," she says. Like much of what she does, Dr Wood made her moments in the media spotlight look effortless.

"You have to make a decision as to whether you are going to engage or not. To say I had no choice is possibly wrong because you always have a choice – but I didn't feel there was a need to make a



Dr Fiona Woods at Royal Perth Hospital

choice. It was clear to me that the whole community wanted to know what was happening so they knew that the best was being done for those people.

"It wasn't just about me at all, it was about the whole response. It was about the community feeling safe."

Since then, she admits, aspects of her life have changed markedly.

"I met a young fellow I've known since he was tiny and at school with my children. He's a med student now. He came to touch base with me at the hospital and he said, 'People are looking at us and I know they are not looking at me. Does that feel strange?'"

"I said, 'It does but people are just so nice.' The attention is so positive, it's not unpleasant in any way. People are just saying that what I do from a professional point of view is appreciated."

She doesn't hesitate to let the media know that what you see is what you get.

"To be perfectly honest, I had avoided the media because it was never something

that I sought at all, it wasn't part of my work. When people have come to do photographs, I've said, 'Well this is what you get.' I don't see any sense in brushing it up."

Her unswerving directness bears witness to her down-to-earth upbringing in a Yorkshire coal-mining village with a father, Geoff, who imbued his four children with the philosophy that whatever they did, it should be their best.

"He was a coal miner from a very young age and he didn't like it at all. He was very keen that we should be given the opportunity to get up in the morning and enjoy what we did. Sport was a big focus for him because that was an opportunity but education rapidly overtook that because opportunities in sport are one in a million. But he knew that if we worked and studied hard, the opportunities for us were that much broader."

As a child, she was "hungry to learn".

"Today I would have been considered a bit hyperactive," she says. "I did lots of things, I was hungry to learn. I was actually a right royal pain the neck – always asking 'Why? Why?' And I wasn't necessarily in an environment that was conducive to learning. The public schools in mining villages weren't forward-thinking.

"I felt distinctly that I was the odd one out. I tried very hard to fit in but I couldn't."

She wanted to be an Olympic sprinter, but "realised I wasn't good enough".

Academically, she was more than good enough, with a growing love for the pure sciences.

She says: "I met someone recently who I was at school with. I had not seen him since year 10. He said one of the things he remembered about me is that I would sit there and concentrate fiercely and say, 'I'm only going to listen to this

once'. I remember being very aware of time and I wanted to do lots of things."

She has certainly managed "lots of things". Studying medicine at St Thomas's in London and then surgery, she soaked up information from every source.

"In surgical training, I learned as much as I could from every situation. There are things I do now that I learned from other areas of surgery. I need people who have got specialist knowledge in many disciplines, for example, imaging, molecular biology, nanochemistry..."

"So I'm looking all the time at trying to get the pieces of the jigsaw together, but that's the way I've been all my life."

She met and married WA-born surgeon Tony Keirath within 13 weeks, knowing a life in Perth was on the cards. "He said it was non-negotiable."

They emigrated with their first two children, Tom and Jess, in 1987. She completed her training in plastic surgery – she is the state's only female plastic surgeon – and had four more children.

Now aged between 10 and 18, they have inherited their mother's passion for exercise and affinity with science.

"Tom remembers going on the ward rounds at weekends with me. When I was working in the lab on the very early days of the skin culture he would come with me. I got called in by his year one teacher once: for his art project he'd built a skin incubator out of cardboard."

She believes children can be persuaded back to science and maths with a more lateral approach.



"We have to make science more exciting by breaking down the barriers between it and art and commerce. It is easier if people have boundaries because they feel comfortable but I think all these barriers are artificial.

"If you stand back, there's a commonality in questioning, learning. Look at the common threads educationally and open the whole thing up, take down the barriers. If you are interested in science that merges into history, so what?"

"Scitech is really important to me because it is an opportunity for kids to be engaged at a grassroots level. For my ten-year-old, it is still her favourite place."

Scientists, she says, must communicate their work to the community. "The bottom line is that how we use science in our society is very interesting. As scientists we have got to engage our society, we have got to communicate. We provide the science but how it is used should be driven by us all.

"We don't get the same level of support that may be afforded in other arenas. You just have to keep at it. The morale that surrounds my area of work has been enormously boosted with the interest in it. Why should you have low morale as a scientist? What you do is exciting, what you do can help people."

Dr Wood lives what she preaches. Recently, at a workshop on Rottne

I was actually a right royal pain the neck ...



Island where she was teaching a small group of Perth GPs about wound healing, one of the doctors said: "You must be really busy at the moment because you are Australian of the Year. Why have you come?"

"I said, 'Because I said yes. Because I said I'd come.' Isn't that interesting? Because I'm Australian of the Year that should not change what I do. I'm Australian of the Year *because* of what I do."

The defining moment in her surgical career occurred on October 1, 1992 at 11.45am. A high school science teacher was brought into RPH with burns to 90 per cent of his body. Relatively new to her role as head of the burns unit and desperate to keep the dangerously ill man alive, she soon found herself at the very edge of scientific knowledge on burns treatment.

"It was a big, difficult time, personally and professionally," she says.

"You've worked and you've trained and all of a sudden you're the boss, you make the decisions and that's where the buck stops.

"I rang a couple of people overseas to help me and they said, 'You've done everything we would do. There's nothing else to offer'."

She turned to the newly invented technique of cultured skin, which then had to come from Melbourne. The patient eventually pulled through.

"I felt if I never did anything again, saving that life was worth it," she says, still visibly moved by the memory. The experience turned her into a team player.

"I was never a team player – you know, I was a sprinter, not into sports where you pass the ball so someone else can kick a goal. To invest in the team is something that we are not taught.

"It was a very vivid realisation that if I

wanted to build something that could be sustainable without me then I had to put a significant amount of energy into building the team. Not just doctors but nurses, physios, psychologists..."

Her development of spray-on skin grew out of this time, working nights in the hospital lab with medical scientist Marie Stoner. In 1993 with the support of a Telethon grant the skin lab was established in Perth in PMH.

They biopsied a tiny patch of the patient's skin and used it to grow new cells. The skin was then placed over the wound in "sheets".

"We were growing sheets of skin because that's what was being done in the States. We were skin grafters and that's what we wanted, but it didn't make

sense. There are no blood vessels in epidermis and we were growing epidermis. We were seeing that the skin was blistering and fragile."

Searching for a way to speed up the healing process, they had a Eureka moment.

"Before they became a sheet, the cells were more active on the surface because they were looking to stick and they were looking for each other. We needed to deliver those cells to the surface.

"I said, 'We should be able to spray this on', so we went to the pharmacy and got everything that sprayed and tested a whole lots of things. I recently opened a conference for aerosols in medicine and I said, 'If only I'd known you guys existed. It would have made life so much easier'."

On the basis of this discovery, the two women founded C3 in 1999. It was floated publicly in 2002.

Characteristically, she downplays the development as another step towards her "holy grail" of scarless healing.

"Spray-on skin is not a great scientific discovery, it's part of a journey. We have got a lot more to learn, a lot more to do."

What are the Australian of the Year Awards?

Each year our nation celebrates the achievement and contribution of eminent Australians through the Australian of the Year Awards by profiling leading citizens who are role models for us all. They inspire us through their achievements and challenge us to make our own contribution to creating a better Australia.

There are four award categories:

- Australian of the Year
- Senior Australian of the Year (60 years and over)
- Young Australian of the Year (16 to 25 years)

Local Hero

The prestigious year round program culminates in the announcement of the national award recipients in Canberra on Australia Day Eve.

Australian of the Year Awards were founded in 1960, when Sir MacFarlane Burnet OM AK KBE received the inaugural award.

Australia Day Committees in each state and territory decided the recipient of the Award.

In 1984 the government upgraded the National Committee to a Commonwealth-funded council, named the National Australia Day Council, with direct representation from each state and territory. In 1990 it became an incorporated public company, with a chair and board members appointed by the federal government.

Since this time, the program has grown to encompass four award categories.

The Young Australian of the Year Award was introduced in 1979, Senior Australian in 1999, and the Local Hero Award in 2003.

www.australianoftheyear.gov.au

Welcome to new members



New club members Sandy McGregor (left) and Barbara Wilson (right) are all smiles as they are warmly welcomed to the club.



Sciona Browne (left) and Judy Tennant (right) were formally inducted to the Board of the Club.

The September meeting was the first in our official new home at The University Club, University of Western Australia.

Two new members, Sandy McGregor and Barbara Wilson, were inducted at the Meeting by Club President Lyn McArthur.

In addition, Sciona Browne and Judy Tennant were formally inducted on the Board of the Club.

The new venue has built in computer projection facilities and these were put to good use by Karen Groves who provided a 'dry run' of

the PowerPoint® presentation of the Ngarinyin Project for the District Conference in Adelaide in October.

Members provided valuable feedback that has been used to fine tune the excellent presentation.

At the next meeting, Judy Tennant and Tricia Summerfield will provide members with an overview of the District Conference and an opportunity to discuss how our club should vote on any changes to Zonta bylaws.



Our new club venue is well equipped with audio-visual facilities, including computer projection equipment.

Dr Mary-Anne Jebb—our new friend in the Kimberley



L-R Lennie McCall, Mary Anne Jebb, Margaret Medcalf and Carole Theobald.

Dr. Mary-Anne Jebb, recently met with members of the Ngarinyin Committee.

Dr. Jebb, an historian, has recently been appointed to the position of Curator of the about to be built Mowanjum Centre for Aboriginal Art. She is superbly qualified for the position and is well-connected to the Gibb River Road communities and personalities.

The newly appointed Manager of the Mowanjum Centre for Aboriginal Art is Derby resident and artist Mark Norval.

The Centre is being funded largely by the Commonwealth Government and it is hoped that it will be completed by July 2006. It is planned as a place for local artists to work.

We hope to work closely with Mary-Anne in the future as we share similar goals.



Spring is here! Time to take a walk in the park...

How lucky we are to live in one of the most beautiful, clean city's in the world—but do we take it for granted?

Recently, I had the pleasure of hosting an old school friend and her son who were visiting Perth for the weekend from Jakarta.

Judith, who grew up on a farm in rural Norfolk in England, currently lives in a city that has the population of Australia, where clear skies are rare and the air is so polluted that she cannot breathe properly.

Their weekend in Perth was one long smile.



We went up to King's Park and walked among the tree tops. The weather wasn't great by Perth standards, but to Judith it was heaven. She and Jonathan kept taking large gulps of air—just because they could! They loved the crisp nip in the spring air and took great delight in walking in the cool rain.



Walking in wide open spaces is a luxury to Judith—spaces in Jakarta



are soon filled by people!

As we made our way across the rolling lawns we passed the 'lady with the baby' statue representing the hopes, trials and tribulations of the pioneer women who helped to build this State.

We sat among the story stones overlooking the lake, basking in peace at one with nature, listening to the birds.



We reflected on the plight of so many people suffering in today's world—especially those in today's disaster zones of Aceh and the other tsunami ravaged countries, the hunger in Sudan, the displacement of people in Zimbabwe, war-torn Iraq and those in the devastated southern states of the USA.

Prior to living in Jakarta, Judith lived in Louisiana, so she could imagine the effect this disastrous hurricane has had on her old neighbourhood.

We continued our walk through the Western Australian Centenary of Women's Suffrage Memorial and Pavilion by the edge of picturesque lake.

The path beneath our feet has many bronze stripes engraved with the names of women's service organisations.

Among them is our own organisation—Zonta International.



Seeing the stripes, helped us to return from our reflections.

Together, these organisations help so many communities at home and abroad. It is through these organisations that we can share hope and make the difference to the world we live in.

Spring is such a lovely time to visit King's Park—when was the last time you took a walk in the park?



Zonta Club of Perth Education Award

This award is to encourage a mature aged woman to complete her first degree. The \$2000 award is for the academic year 2006 to be put towards study for a recognised degree course at a Western Australian university.

Students are eligible to apply who:

- are Australian citizens or have permanent residency status;
- are studying towards a **first undergraduate degree**;
- have successfully completed at least the first year of a degree course;
- do not hold a scholarship, other award, or receive financial assistance under bond to an employer;
- are women aged 25 years or over as on 16 December 2005;
- are able to demonstrate need of financial assistance.

The successful applicant will be selected by a panel of three members of Zonta Club of Perth Inc. Applicants will be assessed on the basis of the following criteria:

- University academic achievement
- Demonstrated need for financial assistance;
- Extra curricular activities, community and voluntary work;
- Extent of demonstrated leadership abilities impacting on the broader community
- Other matters which the panel considers to be of relevance.

CLOSING DATE: Last mail 16 December 2005. Application forms available from www.zontaperth.org.au

WANT TO KNOW WHAT'S HAPPENING IN OUR CLUB? VISIT OUR WEB SITE AT
www.zontaperth.org.au
 Email: zontaperth@yahoo.com.au

Chuckle Corner...

You've just got the hire car from Heathrow airport and drive towards Swindon. Then you see this street sign for the Magic Roundabout and come across this junction.... If you intend visiting UK, I suggest you start thinking about how to negotiate it now!- Ed



"Building Zonta in the 21st Century— inspired by the challenge of change"

Diary Dates

8th September—Club Meeting

The University Club, 6.15 pre-dinner drinks for meeting start at 6.45pm. Special presentation about the forthcoming district conference.

27th September—New Members Night

This will be held at 35 Brewer St, East Perth. Please give Linley Buchanan the names of people that you would like to invite to this informative Zonta evening.

22nd October—Birthing Kit Workshop

St Pius X Catholic Church Parish Hall, 23 Paterson St, Manning, from 9am. All Zontians and friends are invited. Contact Deb Hegarty or Marilyn Piper.

1st-3rd October 2005—District Conference, Glenelg South Australia.

The conference theme is Zonta Action through Partnership (ZAP) . Conference will be held at the Stamford Grand Glenelg Hotel.

8th December 2005—Christmas Party

Following last year's successful event, the Club Christmas Party will again be held at Mt Eliza, in King's Park.

24-29 June 2006—International Convention, Melbourne

Georgina Costello will be among the speakers for this not-to-be-missed event.