

2005 Barry Firkin Orator Emeritus Professor Peter Castaldi – The Man and His Legacy

Abstract by Peter Castaldi, Westmead Hospital, Sydney, NSW, Australia

There have been few medical academics in this country to match the influence and achievements that characterised the career of Barry Firkin. He was a prime mover in three key areas: clinical research with a basic bent: clinical medicine as practitioner, teacher and college examiner; and in communication through the Australian Society of Medical Research of which he was the principal founder and the Haematology Society of Australia in which he participated from the beginning. He had a cheerful engaging personality, a boyish ineptitude in the practical affairs of his household, a remarkable woman, Ruth for a wife who more than compensated and such a liking for golf that they moved next to a renowned Melbourne course when he retired from Monash in 1995.

He had a big impact on young physicians, a series of whom spent time doing research with him and all went on to productive careers in academic and specialist pathways . A feature of these experiences was the breadth of the studies in haematology including haemopoiesis, folate metabolism, PNH, Orotic aciduria, marrow grafting, as well as his preoccupation with platelets and von Willebrand Disease. Especially in the latter work he had the ongoing support of outstanding scientists. Margaret Howard was the pivotal person in the work with Ristocetin published in 1972 which opened up the field of study of primary haemostasis. Sharon Pfueller joined him in 1976 and was a great contributor in work on immune thrombocytopenia. His group at Monash thrived as the years went by and led by Hatem Salem, Shaun Jackson and Katrina Mitchell remain leaders in research.

He expanded his interest to the history of medicine and in his later years wrote about medical eponyms with Judith Whitworth, reflected on women in haematology over the years and wrote thoughtfully about the problems of recruitment and retention in academic medicine. He was a true leader with a passion for discovery and a rare commitment to the best in his discipline.