

SRL – Valedictory from USyd Faculty of Medicine: Prof Paul Seale – January 2003

I begin by acknowledging Simon Chapman, who prepared the first segment of this valedictory.

Steve Leeder leaves the Deanship as not only the head of our Faculty, but as one of Australia's most pre-eminent public health leaders. His contributions to public health research, leadership of the Australian public health community and his prodigious contributions to public commentary on health matters through his journalism mark him as a major figure in our public health history in the past thirty years.

He was awarded a B Sc (Med) with first class honours from this university in 1963 and then graduated with honours in medicine in 1965. He went on to complete his doctorate here in 1974 in respiratory epidemiology after spending time as a medical officer in Papua New Guinea, Canada and at Sydney's Royal North Shore obtaining his FRACP in 1974 also. He then spent time in London and Canada.

In 1976, at the age of 35, he was appointed Foundation Professor of Community Medicine at the University of Newcastle, where he played a lead role in establishing the pioneering medical education program, in addition to being Director of the Asian and Pacific Centre for Clinical Epidemiology from 1982-85.

In 1985 with his appointment to the chair of Public Health and Community Medicine at Westmead Hospital, Steve initiated a 17 year period of academic involvement with the University of Sydney. At Westmead he nurtured the early careers of dozens of public health researchers including six who are now professors: Andrew Wilson, Jane Hall, Bob Cumming, Simon Chapman, Ross Lazarus and Wayne Smith. He also began his long-standing commitment to the development of ethics in medicine through chairing the Faculty's Ethics and Health Law Development Committee (1987-1993) and chairing the Western Sydney Area Health Service's Human Research Ethics committee (1992-2002).

His commitment to the health of the people of western Sydney in particular has been tireless, and it is fitting that his colleagues there will be holding their own farewell to him as Dean later this month.

Steve's contributions to epidemiology have been outstanding. At St Thomas' Hospital in London in 1974-76, he worked with the first group to demonstrate that infant's exposure to parental tobacco smoke could cause respiratory problems. Since then he has published over 200 papers ranging across respiratory epidemiology and asthma, smoking, public health policy, medical ethics, general practice and medical education. Some of these are citation classics.

His service to the public health professional community has been peerless in post 1980 Australian public health. He served on the pioneering Better Health Commission, 1984-86, was National President, Public Health Association of Australia, 1985-88 and then came back for more between 1994 and 1998. He chaired the Targets and Implementation Committee of the Australian Health Ministers' Advisory Council, 1986-88; the NSW Better Health Program (Health for All) Committee, 1988-1991; and the NSW Health Minister's Advisory Committee, 1988-1992. He has been a member of the Area Health Board of the Western Sydney Area Health Service continuously since 1988.

In the past 20 years, there have been few health ministers in NSW or federally who have not sought his regular counsel. Quite simply, there is no one throughout Australia who in the past 30 years has given so much for so long to the public health profession. Neither is there anyone who has played such an on-going role as a public intellectual in the field of public health. Steve's frequent opinion pieces in our major newspapers are always beacons of lucidity, erudition and his very obvious humanitarian values.

Steve has not only written for peer reviewed and weekly medical journals and for newspapers. Since 1992 he has given an average of 19 invited addresses a year, ranging from opening international conferences to talks to community groups in Western Sydney. All who have heard him talk will know that he gives as much attention to talking to small community groups as he does to addressing a health ministers' conference.

Being Dean of the largest faculty in one of Australia's largest universities in times when financial pressures are relentless must surely be one of the most demanding, but vitally important jobs any of us could choose to do. Martin Luther King once said : "The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.".... and that "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter." Steve Leeder has been someone who has always spoken out about things that matter, often in times of challenge.

It was over five years ago that Steve asked me to be Pro Dean. When he did so, I made a somewhat tentative enquiry of him as to what it involved. His reply drew heavily upon the Oxford Dictionary which states that pro means... "before, in front of, in favour of, on account of "..., inferring , I suppose, that I was "in favour of the Dean". If the truth be known I don't think either of us had a clear idea at that time as to what was involved.

I had a couple of exploratory meetings in the Department of Public Health office with Steve and his young son James. I called upon my erstwhile little used skills of listening with one ear to an adult conversation and simultaneously attempting to entertain a lively child by drawing cats on a whiteboard. At that stage I

wasn't sure whether the trio was expected to run the Faculty or whether it was just Steve and me.

When Steve moved to the refurbished Dean's office and James was happily settled in after school care, the serious business began. He clearly articulated a plan for the Faculty that was not all blue sky but a vision that was actually achievable. His **three major goals**, which were to put research on a strategic footing, strengthen the precincts by devolving management and financial autonomy to the Schools and to consolidate our Graduate medical Program, required a great deal of foresight, leadership, encouragement and commitment. and I am pleased to say that they have all been achieved.

Those of you who attended the December Meeting of Faculty last year may remember Steve's detailed report of the Faculty's progress against the milestones in our strategic plan. In that address Steve referred to two additional challenges that we acquired on the way through his deanship ... establishing satisfactory financial management systems and the "rural roll out". To this list I would add the acquisition of the Medical Foundation Building and Sesqui funding for academic position to establish the intellectual capital of the Faculty in new disciplines. All of these have eventuated by dint of Steve's eternal vigilance for opportunities and unwavering perseverance to see issues through to completion.

Despite all the demands of the Deanship, he could still find time to write for the lay press, the *AMA Gazette* and *Australian Doctor* on contemporary issues related to public health and the community. His articles were always cogent and provided thought provoking commentaries on many issues of the day.

Any leadership that tries to look beyond the horizon and reshape an organisation to be well equipped to meet future challenges will encounter difficulties from time to time. Our Faculty has been no different. I believe that Steve has shown considerable courage and fortitude in moving us out of our traditional comfort zones to embrace ideas, concepts and practices that will help us to maintain a competitive edge in our major fields of endeavour, our teaching and research.

It has been an enlightening personal journey for me over the five years that I've worked with Steve. I've come to admire his willingness to embrace new ideas, his readiness to listen and his eloquence in prosecuting a cause.

No man (or person) is an island, and least of all the Dean nowadays. The complexity of running a Faculty of Medicine is daunting and beyond the capability of any one individual. Steve has sought counsel from many of us and created an environment in which our opinions are greatly valued.

In January next year, Steve, Kathy and James are off to Columbia University for a year, where Steve will be a Visiting Senior Research Fellow at the Earth Institute, which is the world's pioneering academic centre for mobilizing the

sciences and public policy in pursuit of a sustainable future, especially for the world's poor. I'm sure you would agree that he leaves the Faculty in good shape for his successor Professor Coats.

In 2004, he will be back with us as Professor of Public Health and Community Medicine, and he will direct the Australian Health Policy Institute within the College of Health Sciences

Steve, we are all indebted to you for the leadership, encouragement and friendship that you have provided for us over the past five years as our Dean and we wish you well in North America. We look forward to having you back amongst our ranks in 2004.

J Paul Seale
Pro-Dean
21 November 2002