

Royal Australasian College of Physicians website:

<http://www.racp.edu.au/page/library/college-roll/college-roll-detail&id=1042>

## College Roll: Whitehead, Vivian Ian Edgar



**Qualifications:** MBE (1945) MB ChB NZ (1940) MD NZ (1949) MRACP (1956) FRACP (1971)

**Born:** 21/2/1915

**Died:** 7/9/1990

### **Biography:**

Vivian Ian Edgar Whitehead, usually known as Ian, or Aussie from his trans-Tasman origin, was born in Sydney in 1915, the eldest son of Adele and Edgar Whitehead. The latter was an itinerant evangelist, and brought his family to New Zealand when Ian was ten, to settle in the Manawata district. From Palmerston North Boys' High Ian proceeded to Dunedin in his mid-thirties, graduating MB ChB in 1940. As a physiology junior lecturer he began to study for his MD which was finally conferred in 1949, for a thesis on the experimental metabolic effects of thiourea in laboratory animals.

Commissioned in the RNZAF, he served on home stations - he married Enid Myrtle Irving, a tutor sister at Dunedin Hospital, before being posted to the Pacific area; while on Bougainville he rescued an airman from a burning plane and, for this and other characteristic conscientious service, he was awarded the MBE. After the war Ian and Enid worked in the mining community of Granity before settling into general practice in Lower Hutt, where he was based for the remaining forty-four years of his very active life.

The family travelled to Britain in the early fifties on the traditional quest for higher qualifications, spending eighteen months in the London area. Soon after returning home, in 1952, he was appointed junior visiting physician to the Hutt Hospital and toiled for this institution for the next twenty-eight years until 1980. He gained his membership of the RACP in 1956 and became a fellow in 1971. He was largely responsible for many developments in the hospital, including the coronary care unit; during the thirteen years he was in charge he attended over 500 cardiac arrests, dropping everything else, night or day, to support his nursing and junior medical colleagues in these emergencies. Always practical and supportive, he led by example, but published little after his backroom research was completed. He was a regular participant in clinical meetings, though did not seek College office.

Self-effacing, utterly honest, he was the essence of tact and diplomacy in dealing with difficult patients and sensitive colleagues, and a trusted troubleshooter in ethical matters. After retirement from hospital practice he continued to sit on the War Pensions Board and gave his specialised advice in this field even after the authority was abolished and until three weeks before he died.

Ian had many accomplishments outside clinical medicine, with forty years active membership of the NZ Alpine Club, an association dating from pioneering expeditions in South Westland as a superbly-fit medical student. He climbed with Holloway, Sealy and others, mapping the Pyke and Hollyford valleys and conquering fifteen or so virgin peaks, with packs of up to ninety-five pounds. In this field his greatest achievement was in conquering Mt Aspiring, which topped 9959 feet when he climbed it, at the age of fifty-five, with his son Neil. Ian did not spare himself in community affairs, earning eventual life membership of the local Marriage Guidance Council, and presidency of the Rotary Club of Hutt. He was honoured for his training of the officers of the Wellington Free Ambulance Association and was much involved with evangelical and administrative aspects of his lifelong commitment to the Open Brethren fellowship. Enid, who died in 1989, had supported him ably over the forty-seven years of their marriage, and both were united in pride over the achievements of their children, Lois and Neil. Seven years before his death myeloma was diagnosed, and he faced repeated courses of medication and radiation as a calm and grateful stoic, rarely complaining, as his physical frame shrank around him.

**Author:** M H WATSON

**References:** Pascoe, J, *Great Days in New Zealand Exploration*, Wellington 1959, **170-2**; <="" i="">, 1990, **103**, 522-3.