

# Fremantle Hospital and Health Service



## Director of Diving and Hyperbaric Medicine retires

The retirement of Fremantle Hospital's Dr Robert Wong ends an era of personal excellence in saving the lives and health of recreational and pearl divers across WA.

Hundreds of people stricken with the bends or suffering life-threatening illness can thank Dr Wong and his staff for their recovery. Dr Wong has been director of Diving and Hyperbaric Medicine at Fremantle Hospital for 10 years.

His diverse career - from anaesthetising WA's first heart transplant patient to being asked to be the personal physician for the Crown Prince of Orange of the Netherlands during a WA visit - was highlighted at a special farewell for Dr Wong this week.

But, Dr Wong regards his role initiating formal qualifications in diving and hyperbaric medicine for the Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists (ANZCA) as one of his important achievements. It has resulted in the first academic qualification for diving and hyperbaric medicine in Australasia with Dr Wong appointed as the first chairman of examinations for the ANZCA Certificate in Diving & Hyperbaric Medicine. He had been an examiner for the Primary Examination for ANZCA for 12 years, as well as teaching physiology to anaesthetic candidates in WA since 1976 for which he received an ANZCA Council Citation. He is also a member of the team of inspectors that visits Hyperbaric Units in Australia and New Zealand for accreditation.



### *Farewell*

*Dr Robert Wong surrounded by registered nurses Helen Mullins, Liz Williams and clinical nurse manager Sue Thurston at his farewell afternoon tea.*

The second in a series of Bulletins about staff, achievements, departments and events.

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In his time at Fremantle Hospital, Dr Wong has improved the use of hyperbaric medicine by introducing a system of patient assessment, purchasing vital equipment, increasing the available use of the unit and complying with Australian Standards that he helped to write.

Dr Wong's career has seen him embrace defence and WA's pearling industry, as well as over 30 years experience as a cardiac anaesthetist at the Royal Perth Hospital. A specialist in underwater medicine to the Royal Australian Navy, he, together with another naval medical officer, managed all diving casualties in WA in the 1980s initially in the chamber in HMAS Leeuwin and subsequently in HMAS Stirling. He also established a chamber in Broome for the pearling industry.

Dr Wong has an impressive medical Navy background, He has worked with Navy diving teams and assisted

with submarine escape training and the establishment of a hospital ship. He served in shore establishments around the country. As well as sea-going ships which have been Her Majesty's Australian Ships Diamantina, Jervis Bay, Moresby, Perth, and Derwent. He was awarded the Australian Defence Medal and the Reserve Force Decoration. He also spent time with the Royal Navy at the Institute of Naval Medicine and the Submarine Escape Training Tank in HMS Dolphin as well as the Canadian Navy's Defence and Civil Institute of Environmental Medicine in Toronto.

He also was invited in 1984 by the Deputy Commissioner of WA Police, Mr Wilson to be the diving medical officer for the Police Diving Squad.

Appointed as the Consultant in Diving Medicine to the Pearling Industry in WA, his research helped dramatically reduce the incidence of decompression sickness for pearl divers - from as high as 45 per cent to almost negligible at 0.01 per cent. For this work, he was recognised and given two international awards (Oceaneering International Award

and the Craig Hoffman Memorial Award) by the USA's Undersea and Hyperbaric Medical Society, the first person to receive two awards in the same year. He was also invited to author a chapter "Empirical Diving Techniques" in the textbook "Bennett & Elliott's The Physiology & Medicine of Diving" published in 2003.

"Diving constitutes about 10 per cent of the work load in our hyperbaric unit. The bulk of our work is with radiation tissue damage, crush injuries or other acute ischaemic conditions, necrotising fasciitis, infections, toxic gas poisoning, and problem wounds, diabetic ulcers and gas gangrene," Dr Wong said.

Retirement means Dr Wong can pursue his many interests - kayaking, cycling, classical music, travelling, cooking, painting, photography and anthropological artefacts.

*BELOW: Hyperbaric Team: Sue Thurston, Dr Adam Howard, Dr Robert Wong, Tom Nalpon, Dr Ronald Flapper, Russell Cronin, Helen Mullins, Liz Williams, Dr Ian Dey.*

