

Leeder Centre Launch 3rd December 2024

Professor Andrew Wilson

Thank-you for joining us this evening for this official renaming of the Menzies Centre for Health Policy and Economics to the Leeder Centre for Health Policy, Economics and Data. I have been director or co-director of the Centre since 2014 when I took over following the retirement of our founder, Professor Stephen Leeder. It is my honour on behalf of all of us in the Centre to briefly outline for you why we have made this decision.

A little history – Prior to the 2006, Professor Stephen Leeder had commenced an initiative to develop a profile for health research at the University of Sydney. He established a network across the Faculty of Health and even beyond the Faculty, for example in the Faculty of Education, which brought together people who were interested in health policy. Within the network were groups, nodes, that had focussed on specific issues, for example of health regulation.

In 2006, the Sir Robert Menzies Memorial Foundation held a competitive grant call to support the establishment of a centre in health policy and the University of Sydney and ANU were successful with a combined proposal. The size of the grant was relatively small, but it was enough to incentivize the 2 universities to commit to some academic staffing. The joint Centre ran very successful through to 2014 when the grant ceased and subsequently the formal agreement ceased between the Universities with the Menzies Centre for Health Policy retaining the name at our University and the ANU group renamed as the Menzies Centre for Health Governance.

Following the move of my first co-director, Professor Adam Elshaug to the University of Melbourne, in 2021 I invited Professor Kirsten Howard to join me as co-director of the Centre. In recognition of the expertise she was bringing the Centre name was changed to the Menzies Centre for Health Policy and Economics. Since 2014, the Centre has grown substantially and in recognition of this in 2022 MCHPE was successful in its application to the Faculty of Medicine and Health to form an Impact Centre (currently funded to the end December 2026).

So why a name change at this point? In fact, the discussion about this commenced shortly after I arrived. The Menzies Foundation has been very successful in maintaining the memory and works of Sir Robert Menzies, embedding his name in the titles of multiple research centres not just in the health field. Many of us in the Centre have been introduced at functions as belonging to other bodies bearing his name - my favourites, either the Menzies Research Centre, the think-tank associated with the Liberal Party of Australia, or the Menzies Anxiety Clinic. I want to be clear that the decision to change was not driven by any difference of opinion or politic or otherwise with the Menzies Foundation with whom we have always had a good relationship. It has been driven by 2 factors, a decision that we need to be more uniquely identifiable in the public and academic space, and because we saw an opportunity to acknowledge and recognise a great contributor specifically to health policy and public health research and dialogue, our founder Professor Stephen Leeder.

I could spend an hour going through Stephen's achievements beyond the establishment of this Centre but as many of you know him well, I will only touch on a few elements of his illustrious career. He has a long history of involvement in public health research, educational development and policy. Indeed, it is important to us that his role as a thinker, commentator and influencer in health policy is based on a foundation of very high-quality epidemiological research in respiratory medicine and cardiovascular disease. Indeed, my association with Steve commenced when I joined him as his register in the newly formed Department of Community and Geriatric Medicine at Westmead attracted by his work in cardiovascular disease epidemiology which I aspired to emulate. I am not the only person in the audience this evening who started their academic journey under Steve's tutelage and guidance at Westmead, and for which I am for every grateful. Indeed, if we were to conduct an analysis of our generation of academic leaders in epidemiology and public health, you would find a disproportionate number commenced their journey with Steve.

It is difficult to quickly summarise the many leadership roles Steve has had at a state, national and international level. Never one to hold back with a cutting analysis of events, his profile is heightening by his writing in non-academic media, and as always with someone willing to express his views publicly, he has attracted attention at all levels of government. Graduating from this University in medical science in 1962, he gained his medical degree in medicine in 1966, and his PhD in 1974 and his Doctorate of Medicine in 2006, all from his alma mater. Not to stop there, he went on to gain a Doctor of Medical Science as recently as 2016 in Studies in the evolution, consequences and control of cardiovascular disease in Australia

and other countries. He was dean of the Medical Faculty for 6 years, including for the introduction of the new graduate educational program and the formation of an extensive rural education network for medical students. He has also served on the Senate of the University of Sydney for several terms. His contributions to this University alone would be enough to warrant recognition in the naming of a Centre.

However, I would also highlight his role as part of the ground changing group of senior health academics that started an experiment in medical education known as the University of Newcastle medical program. His research and writing have generated international fame and led to many partnerships internationally and if you look through his list of publications you will find the names of many of the most respected epidemiologists of his generation particularly in the field of chronic disease.

His contributions in health of course go beyond academic and research. He had two double terms as national president of the Public Health Association, and one triennium as chair of the Health Advisory Committee of NHMRC. He has been advisor formal and informal to national and state governments – just as an indicator of how far this contribution goes back, some of you may recall the 1985 Better Health Commission of which he was a member. The Commission's report, 'Looking forward to Better Health', provided one of the most insightful perspectives on prevention as well the overall health system and was an impetus to the introduction of the concept of health targets in Australia. The final report was released in 1986, the year of Haley's comet and the year I became your register. Subsequently there have been numerous inquiries that Steve has

contributed too but the comet is not due again until 2061 so while I expect to contribute to a few more reviews, I doubt either of us is going to experience Haley's comet again. His ongoing commitment to the health of the people of Western Sydney was also reflected in his chairing of the Board of the District Health Service. He also has the questionable honour of being the only sacked editor of the MJA! His many contributions were publicly and formally recognised in his appointment as officer in the Order of Australia in 2006.

So, as we mulled a change of Centre name, we tried many combinations and their resulting acronyms but kept coming back to a very good reason to risk the profile we had built around the Menzies Centre title and really it came down to wanting to recognise our founder. I would like to say that the tipping point was the launch of Stephen's collection of poetry which some of us attended on Sunday – I love the idea that we are named after a poet – I don't think there is a health research group that can claim that anywhere – but no it was his illustrious career as a researcher, health philosopher, academic and health service leader and mentor to many of us.

So colleagues, the University has agreed to renaming our Centre as the Leeder Centre in Health Policy, Economics and Data. We added "Data" to the title to reflect both the long-standing involvement of researchers in the Centre in use of large health data sets, including for example the analyses that Steve and our associate Professor Farhat Yusuf have undertaken. But we wanted to recognise the formal joining of Professor Natasha Nasser's group to the Centre, who brings an international reputation in large data linkage studies in child health.

So, Steve, thank-you for agreeing to allow us to recognise you in our title and hence forth we will be the Leeder Centre – thank-you for joining us in the launch.