

RENAMING THE CENTRE FOR HEALTH POLICY, ECONOMICS AND DATA

Tuesday 3rd December 2024

Moore College

I am greatly honoured to give my name to the Centre. It is a generous gesture and I receive it with much pleasure! Thank you! Thank you especially to those who have worked to establish the Centre over the years, and I especially thank Andrew (Wilson) and more recently Kirsten (Howard) for their leadership and advocacy and goodwill that have enabled the Centre to grow.

The Centre enjoyed strong support in its infancy, from people including the late Professor John Young, and then in the longer term, from Milton Lewis, Bruce Armstrong, George Rubin, Jim Gillespie, Lesley Russell, Michael Frommer, Rebekah Jenkin, and Don Nutbeam and many of you here today.

The Centre originally was heavily grounded in epidemiology. The growth of interest in health economics was a step that was taken early in the life of the Centre as an essential element of health policy and Kirsten has provided strong leadership. As you have heard from the other stream leaders there is now a pleasing diversity of disciplines in the Centre. The Centre is what it is because of the calibre of its many students, research staff, teachers, and affiliates, and because of the quality of its education, research, and service. It has matured in interesting and productive ways.

Major contributions have also come from the support staff, especially Diana Freeman, whose warmth and good humour and skill as manager and event coordinator who organised this event. Other support staff including Amanda Dominello, Yvonne Inall, Emma Dupal, and Sandie Tolliday have given generously of their time and energy to the Centre.

The Menzies Foundation were generous supporters of a dual initiative in health policy – at USyd and ANU. Bob Wells, who developed the Canberra Centre, was a congenial colleague. The Menzies Foundation has an enviable record for seeding successful health and medical research enterprises.

I could trace the origins of my interest in health policy back a long way. As a medical student I was astonished when I received an HD in public health! It was such an exceptional event I developed an immediate love for PH! Policy owes a lot to public health!

The Hon Professor Peter Baume, here today, initiated me into the world of health policy in 1976 when I went to work in the new medical school in Newcastle. Peter, whom I had known as a senior physician at RNSH, had moved into politics.

As a Senator for Nnt SW, (1974 – 1991), Peter took a strong interest in social welfare. He had shaken policy up over drug and alcohol. In 1976, he involved me in his project to do more about measuring outcomes as a key element of policy. I came to see where academics could contribute to policy. I retain a passionate interest in learning what our policies achieve, including their social and economic impact. Thank you, Peter!

Another politician from whom I learned much about the practice and value of policy was The Hon Jillian Skinner, a NSW parliamentarian from 1994 to 2017. In the years before becoming NSW Minister for Health Medical Research 2011 to 2014, Jillian engaged with a wide constituency about health and health policy, listening carefully and observing.

When she became health minister in 2011, she knew exactly what she should do – and set about doing it. I saw the effort required to develop and implement effective health policy including community involvement, meeting with professionals and consumers on equal terms.

I note in passing that both the ‘honourables’ had successful careers before entering politics.

Now the Centre has added data to its remit. This is not the android of Star Trek but a recognition that new information technology in health care and health policy requires vastly more attention to the quality and organisation of the huge amounts of data at our disposal.

My colleague, Paul Gross, has demonstrated what can be done with data of high quality and integrated, using data in the Veterans Affairs health system to develop policy recommendations. We are not starting from Ground Zero, here. The NSW Bureau for Health Information and work on big data in health at UNSW are making solid contributions, as is the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, and the much-overlooked Australian Bureau of Statistics.

In the US, private equity companies are moving into this field where they see handsome profit margins beckoning. Public health services are behind. So, I’m glad data is in the new title for our Centre.

Again, my thanks to you all for your support, past, present, and continuing, and for the great honour you have paid me today. And all good wishes to the renamed Centre!