

Obituary

PROFESSOR ROSS SPARK
1954–2013



Photograph of Ross Spark kindly provided by Craig McDonald.

We lost an extremely professional and highly respected colleague and friend when Ross Spark passed away on Monday 28 January 2013 at the Cairns Base Hospital.

Ross had a distinguished career in health promotion, public health and tropical medicine. He spent the majority of his career in Northern Australia, particularly working on tropical and Indigenous health issues. He loved the tropics, particularly North Queensland, and he got great satisfaction from generously contributing to the region and its people.

For over three decades Ross did much to ensure that numerous health promotion professionals in rural and remote areas of Australia had study and work opportunities. He mentored many while they were employed under his supervision, and supported and encouraged them to complete university studies in health promotion, often by distance learning.

Ross was a champion for health promotion: he believed in it, he understood its political realities and took every opportunity to promote it in the health services in which he

worked, and he was a strong advocate of it to many government officials and politicians.

Ross had no need to self-promote and did not profess to be what he wasn't. He had a positive and encouraging personality and was a very personable man who had a terrific rapport with people from all walks of life. He was comfortable engaging with high level bureaucrats and senior politicians, health workers, academics, researchers and, most importantly, with the community members, including those who were recipients of his programs. He gained respect from all who were fortunate to cross his path.

Ross's vision of living close to nature came to fruition in his 'Tree House' built in the rain forest outside of Cairns. It was so close to nature that, in the wet season, a stream happily gurgled its way through the 'basement', actually between the steel poles that supported the house. Many of his friends enjoyed grilled barramundi and good wine as they debated the health issues of the day.

Ross's initial training was in education and, in the early 1980s, he worked in the Queensland Department of Education in Brisbane. He then became Director of Health Promotion for the Northern Territory (NT) Department of Health and Community Services for several years, where he pioneered the development of health promotion and public health programs with Indigenous communities.

In 1986–1987 Ross took time away from his NT work to complete a Masters degree at the University of Oregon in Eugene, USA, as a Rotary Foundation Scholar. Not only did he excel in his studies, but he was also a popular student who brought a wealth of practical Australian experience to the course.

Ross was recruited to the Health Promotion staff at Curtin University (1989–1991) as the Project Officer on a Commonwealth grant to help develop the Health Promotion Distance Learning program for regional/remote Australia. This was one of the first postgraduate distance learning courses in Health Promotion in the world. Ross made an enormous contribution to this program and continued to have an involvement in it well after he left Curtin. Also during that time he undertook his PhD and worked with the Curtin team to secure an external grant to conduct the research. His PhD research was in remote Indigenous communities in the Kimberley region of WA, 'Developing Health Promotion methods in remote Aboriginal Communities'. His work on that project was also highly regarded. Ross maintained professional links and friendships in WA and continued to be a strong supporter, referring many students to Curtin to complete postgraduate programs in Health Promotion.

In 1992 Ross established Queensland Health's first Tropical Public Health Unit in Cairns. This later became a network of public health units across northern Queensland (Cairns, Townsville, Mackay and Mount Isa), of which he continued as Director until 2007. Through a combination of health promotion, public health medicine and environmental health, his team made an enormous difference to health in these regions, with a strong emphasis on the health of

the Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander people. Ross's excellent leadership was integral to this success.

Ross consulted extensively in the Asia-Pacific Region for the World Health Organization and AusAID, and was Health Adviser to the Australian Embassy in Vietnam in 2007–2008 for AusAID. Acknowledgement of his outstanding management skills and expertise in tropical health led to an invitation to the position of Deputy Director of the Menzies School of Health Research in Darwin in 2008.

Ross's final position was as Head of the School of Public Health, Tropical Medicine and Rehabilitation Sciences at James Cook University (JCU) based in Cairns, from 2011. He brought vision and energy to JCU, creating a vibrant atmosphere for excellence in teaching and research relating particularly to the tropics.

Ross earned undergraduate degrees (BEd, BA) from the University of Queensland, a Master's degree in Public Health from the University of Oregon and a PhD from the School of Public Health at Curtin University in Perth. Adjunct appointments included with the School of Public Health, Curtin University, WA, and the School of Public Health, University of the Sunshine Coast, Queensland.

Ross's contributions to scholarship in health promotion included his position as Associate Editor of the *Health Promotion Journal of Australia* from 1994 to 1999 and his co-authorship of two seminal health promotion textbooks (*Health and the Media: Principles and Practices for Health Promotion* and *Health Promotion Strategies and Methods*). These texts, written with Professors Rob Donovan and Garry Egger, played a significant role in the training of health promotion students over many years. Ross also had recently been appointed to the Editorial Advisory Board of the *Health Promotion Journal of Australia*.

He had a great respect for indigenous cultures and was ever so conscious of the havoc being wrought on their lives by tobacco and alcohol. One day we walked together on the veranda of the Thursday Island Hospital observed the impact of diabetes on the many amputees waiting for a surgical clinic. Ross was a man of compassion and observing scenes like this drove him to further efforts for health promotion for our first people. (Colin Binns)

I first met Ross Spark in the 1980s when he was with the NT Department of Health. Garry Egger recommended me as a market researcher and Ross commissioned me to conduct surveys on Territorians' beliefs about health. Thus began the Egger–Spark–Donovan relationship, which sadly came full circle on the night of Friday 25 January when Ross suffered the first of the several strokes that took his life. That very afternoon, with 4 minutes to the publisher's deadline, we finished the last chapter in our revision of the popular *Health Promotion Strategies and Methods*, and Ross went home in high spirits to relax after a busy week. We lost a great friend, and health promotion lost a great practitioner, advocate and teacher. (Rob Donovan)

The School of Public Health, Tropical Medicine and Rehabilitation Sciences at JCU has set up a Memorial Fund with donations to go towards an Indigenous student scholarship in Ross' name. Donations can be given via the JCU website (<http://alumni.jcu.edu.au/RossSparkMemFund>).

Peter Howat
Colin Binns
Jonine Jancey