

# Jocelyn Robert Lane Forsyth: 03/09/1939–03/02/2022

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## Scholar, teacher, storyteller, conservationist and avid traveller



Dr Jocelyn Forsyth, known to many as Dr F or Joc, was a man of many facets. He was a larger-than-life character who grabbed everything he took on by the horns and changed it for the better. He commenced his 26 years of service in the Department of Microbiology and Immunology at the University of Melbourne in 1968 as Assistant Director of the Microbiological Diagnostic Unit, invariably referred to as the MDU. He subsequently became Director in 1977, a position previously held by the Head of Department. After his retirement in 1994 he remained a regular visitor while expanding on his book on the history of the MDU, which he initially co-authored with Alan Woodgyer in 1997.

Dr Forsyth was a man of great integrity and had an infectious enthusiasm for public health microbiology with a particular passion for parasites. He was a longstanding member of the ASM Parasitology and Tropical Medicine Special Interest Group and established the Parasitology program for the Royal College of Pathologists of Australia. He was also a founding member of what was originally known as the Venereology Society of Victoria, and is now known as the Sexual Health Society of Victoria. He served a term as the ASM Victorian branch chair from 1967 to 1968. He always encouraged his staff at MDU to be actively involved in an appropriate professional society, either as members of the ASM or AIFST.

During his time at MDU he oversaw a period of great change, both with multiple state government restructures and the type of work undertaken. The microbiological landscape dramatically changed with the ease of overseas travel and the influx of immigrants and Dr Forsyth used this as an opportunity to position the MDU as a highly respected microbiological reference centre. He set MDU up as the enteric reference laboratory for Victoria and much of Australia. He initiated a close working relationship between the Victorian Department of Health and the laboratory, a model that is unique to Victoria. Invitations to the MDU Christmas lunches were highly valued and served to forge the bond between the two organisations. He turned MDU into a national and international reference centre, supported by real time data, and played an integral role in establishing a number of

surveillance schemes including NEPPSS for enteric pathogens and the Neisseria surveillance testing program. One of his most important legacies was his initiative to preserve the bacteria responsible for various outbreaks and for specific infections, so providing an invaluable resource for future researchers.

Dr Forsyth could have been seen by some as a hard task master. His work ethic involved long hours and he expected others to share his dedication to getting the job done and done well. He saw his work as a vocation rather than as paid employment and his employees as his extended family. On Saturday mornings he was invariably in his office or the lab and made tea for everyone as well as entertained them with fascinating stories. He enjoyed engaging with his staff and many of them benefited enormously from his teaching and mentoring, continuing on to life-long careers in Microbiology. This willingness to share knowledge and enthuse others extended to generations of medical students where his lectures to them were greatly enlivened by his antics, including mimicking patient's clinical signs and relating graphic personal experiences. He was particularly proud of the demanding exam questions that he set, which required students to work through problems not previously sighted. Three of the current jurisdictional Chief Health Officers were subjected to, and presumably survived, what was regarded as a formidable challenge.

Many fellow microbiologists and public health practitioners found Joc to be a mine of information, a source of knowledge and a gifted problem solver. He was always thinking about how to do things better and how to position MDU to best meet the public health needs of Victoria and Australia. Others found him a supportive and generous colleague. He had a great sense of humour and a booming laugh to match. He was an extraordinary man and will be greatly missed.

This tribute was compiled with help from many former friends, staff and colleagues, with major contributions from Professor Benjamin Howden, Professor Roy Robins Browne, Agnes Tan and Peter Traynor. Sadly there is not space to include the plethora of wonderful personal stories that were shared but they all emphasised that Joc was a real gentleman, and did, as directed by the founder of Scouting, Lord Robert Baden Powell, '...leave this world a better place than you found it so when your turn comes to die you can die happy in feeling that you have not wasted your time but have done your best'.