

Comment

A College benefactor: Frank Forster – obstetrician, gynaecologist, medical historian and bibliophile

Frank Menzies Cameron Forster was born in Sydney in 1923, the younger son of Cameron McDougall Forster, a medical practitioner, and Jean Catherine Forster. The family later moved to Melbourne where Forster won a scholarship to the Melbourne Church of England Grammar School, and went on to study medicine at Melbourne University. Forster's medical course was interrupted when he developed paraplegia from a spinal tumour. Postoperatively, he was on crutches and left his medical studies to work at the Commonwealth Scientific and Research Organisation (CSIRO). In his eulogy at Forster's memorial service, Professor Roger Pepperell recounted that it was Professor (Pansy) Wright who eventually convinced Forster to return to medical school. Forster graduated in 1948 with honours in obstetrics, gynaecology and surgery, and began his medical career at the Royal Melbourne Hospital. He later moved to the Royal Women's Hospital (RWH), Melbourne, where he was resident medical officer, assistant pathologist and registrar in obstetrics and gynaecology. He then travelled to England and became regional registrar at the Soho Hospital for Women, London, gaining his membership of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists in 1953.

In 1954 Forster returned to Melbourne to be second assistant and then first assistant in the professorial unit at the University of Melbourne, under Sir Lance Townsend. Forster became an honorary obstetrician at the RWH in 1959, a position he held until 1965, during which time he established his private practice in East Melbourne. While still a member of the professorial unit at the RWH, Forster became the honorary consultant obstetrician and gynaecologist to the Fairfield Hospital for Infectious Diseases, a position he held for 30 years. He was also the honorary obstetrician and gynaecologist at Fairlea Women's Prison for many years. Forster continued in private practice until his retirement in 1989. He died on 18 March 1995.

In all aspects of obstetrics and gynaecology, Forster's care of women was meticulous. 'During the 1960s Forster was a world authority on liver disease in pregnancy ... and throughout his career, he specialised in assisting women with difficult pregnancies and births.'¹ His work included the treatment of pregnant women suffering from severe infectious illnesses. Forster was known for his 'considerable experience and expertise at vaginal delivery of the babies of polio victims.'² He was also interested in cervical incompetence and he refined a procedure originally developed by Ian McDonald,

involving a cervical suture. Forster designed a special instrument for inserting the suture, which consisted of a modified broad ligament needle, known as the 'Frank Forster needle'³ (Figs 1, 2).

Forster's influence and contribution to the Royal Australian College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (RACOG) was considerable. He established the first collection of instruments at the College, which was displayed at the opening of Old College House at 8 La Trobe Street in 1954. He became a Foundation Fellow of the RACOG in 1978. Forster was invited to join the inaugural Archival Committee of the RACOG in 1980 and served on that committee until his death. In 1982 he was appointed the inaugural honorary curator of the College Collection. One of Forster's enduring philanthropic legacies was his gift to the College of his entire medical history collection in 1987. An extra wing was added to College House to accommodate the collection.

Forster had systematically acquired his extensive collection over many years. It consisted of books, pamphlets, medical instruments, research papers, prints, decorative objects and ephemera relating to the history of obstetrics and gynaecology and women's health. His interests extended to sexology, birth control, eugenics, maternal and infant care, mothercraft, infertility, ovariectomy and the social problems of women generally. The collection also included advertising material from pharmacy suppliers and many rare and unique Australian and New Zealand pamphlets.

In 1989 Forster was instrumental in establishing the Glyn White Research Fellowship of the RACOG, to promote research in perinatal medicine. In recognition of his distinguished service to the College and to the discipline of obstetrics and gynaecology, Forster was awarded the President's Medal by the RACOG in 1990. To ensure the future of the historical collections, Forster established the Friends of the College Collection, to provide funds for the ongoing costs of expanding, maintaining and conserving the collections. He also established a library support fund, later named the Frank Forster Memorial Fund. In 1995 the library at College House (Fig. 3) was named the Frank Forster Library.

Forster was passionate about medical history and was a founding member and later president of the Medical History Society of Victoria. He was 'a founding father of the Australian Society for the History of Medicine and the Book Collectors' Society and was innovative and influential.'⁴

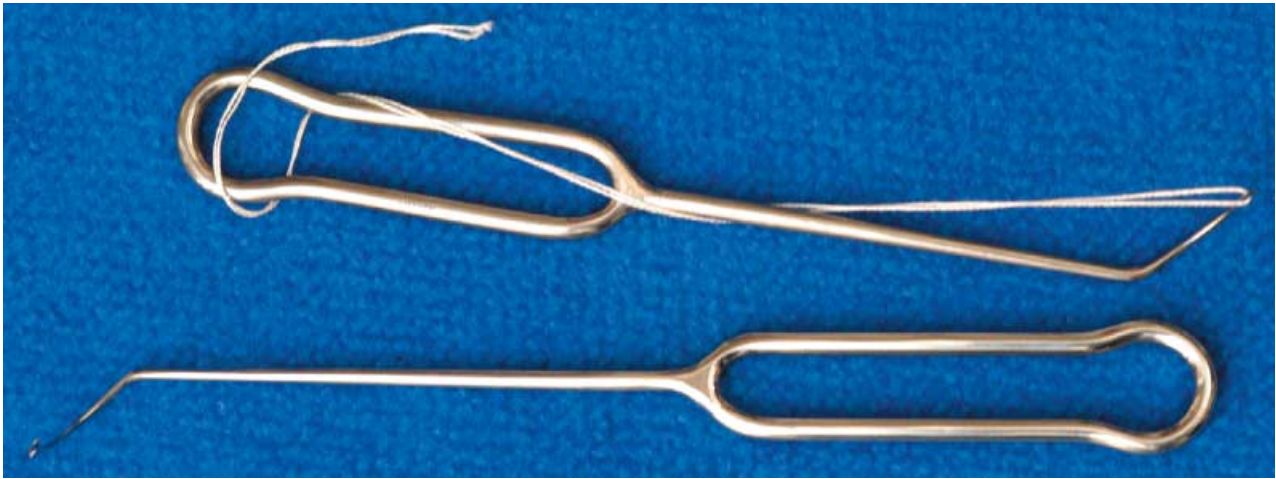


Figure 1 'Frank Forster needle' (Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists Museum – photographer, F Artuso).



Figure 2 'Frank Forster needle' detail (Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists Museum – Photographer, F Artuso).

Over the years, Forster delivered many papers at medical history conferences in Australia and overseas, where he met other medical and social historians. He continued to maintain contact with these historians as is evident from his personal papers held in the Archives of the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (RANZCOG), as it is known now following the amalgamation of the two colleges. Forster was particularly interested in the life and work of Australian gynaecologist Norman Haire, known for his outspoken writings on birth control, sex education and sexual reform. Forster held the Norman Haire Fellowship, University of Sydney, for two consecutive years in 1978 and 1979. He had intended to publish the results of his research in a book on birth control in Australia, but unfortunately this was never accomplished due to bouts of ill health in his later years.

As a lecturer, Forster 'inspired students and medical practitioners with his enthusiasm and encyclopaedic knowledge (Fig. 4). He gave freely of his advice to students and historians,



Figure 3 Professor Hans Schadewaldt, of Dusseldorf, Germany (left) with Forster in the Royal Australian College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists Library, 1991 (from the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists Archives).

offering them wisdom and an interpretation of the material presented' as said by Dr Bryan Gandevia in his eulogy at Forster's memorial service. Forster presented the first Richard Tracy Memorial Lecture at the RWH in 1964. The



Figure 4 Forster lecturing to medical students in the corridor of Labour Ward 30, Royal Women's Hospital, Melbourne, circa 1951 (from the Royal Women's Hospital Archives).

name of this annual lecture series was changed in 1968 to the Tracy-Maund Memorial Lecture to commemorate the cofounders of the RWH, Richard Tracy and John Maund.

Frank Forster has been described by Dr Gandevia as 'a very complex individual ... capable of being a brilliant

actor ... he could also be reserved and remote. He was great company and had a rather wicked sense of humour. Dr Geoffrey Bishop remembers Forster as

'honest, intelligent and forthright, with a wry sense of humour and emphatic in his views. He had compassion for others and was steadfast for what he believed in. He had broad interests, a deep intellect with a capacity to communicate to all, and an ability to put patients at their ease.'

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References

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- 2 Anderson WK. *Fever Hospital. A History of Fairfield Infectious Diseases Hospital*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2002.
- 3 Forster FMC. The incompetent cervix: an instrument for inserting the suture. *Aust NZ J Obstet Gynaecol*. 1965; 5: 75-6.
- 4 Attwood HA. Frank Menzies Cameron Forster, 1923-95: A tribute. *Medical History Australia: Newsletter of the Australian Society of the History of Medicine*, 3rd Series 1995; 15: 2.