

# Tony's activism started on the typewriter



**Dr Tony Ryan**

Chair, Public Hospital Doctors Practice Group

## When did you first know you wanted to be a doctor?

My school counsellor (Rhonda White, the wife of pharmacist Terry White) was the first to suggest it in Year 12. Thanks for the advice, Rhonda! My mum wanted me to be an actuary because I was good at maths. My brother and father did engineering, so that was a possibility; but in the end, I thought medicine would be more interesting. So I chose medicine – a decision I'm very happy with.

## Why did you join the AMA?

As a student, I worked in AMA Queensland boxing up deliveries. I realised how incredibly inefficient hospitals were – ordering endotracheal tubes at the last minute. When I was a registrar at Fremantle I was upset at the health department's attempts to force junior doctors to sign unsatisfactory new contracts.

As it was the 1990s, I typed a letter on an old-fashioned typewriter and met with medical admin, who were very supportive of my concerns and did not agree with the health department's plans.

Prior to that, I was aware of the industrial campaign in Queensland when I was an intern, which involved a mass signing of undated resignation forms. It resulted in improved junior doctors' pay and conditions to get increased FTE, overtime rates, and less on-call – which previously didn't exist. These early experiences led me to appreciate the workplace gains that can be made with concerted industrial pressure.

## Why did you join the AMA (WA) Council?

As an active member on the Inter Hospital Liaison Committee (now the Public Hospitals Doctors Group), I was keen to advocate for physicians and their patients further by stepping up to Council. I was working in Armadale and Fremantle hospitals at the time, so I was well placed to understand and represent both underfunded secondary/outer metro and tertiary hospital issues. Plus, around that time, we had our first ever stop-work industrial rally organised by the AMA.



Dr Tony Ryan at work.

## Why did you choose your specialty?

General Medicine has a vast array of potential diagnostic dilemmas and conditions, unlike the limited range of conditions in some subspecialties. Like GPs, we get to look after patients through their whole journey, and we can do rural and remote work where our broad skills are invaluable. We have the options of dual training or developing a special interest such as diabetes, metabolic medicine or point-of-care ultrasound, or if working in remote areas, training in scopes or echocardiography. I was privileged to make several trips to Christmas Island and Nauru to see refugees and provide much-needed generalist specialist input.

## What would you tell a young doctor looking to work in your specialty?

Upskill in modern technology, particularly POCUS (point-of-care ultrasound scans) and develop a subspecialty side interest. Do a wide range of subspecialty jobs as an RMO or junior registrar and do a rural or remote term – this will provide invaluable experience.

My time in Townsville with all the infectious diseases such as melioidosis, leprosy and tuberculosis marinum was an amazing learning opportunity. And finally, don't do your physician exams too early – be patient.

## What advances in medicine are having the greatest impact on your practice?

More accurate diagnostic radiology and genetic research. This has led to an exponential increase in our ability to target rheumatological, neurological, haematological and malignant diseases, resulting in fantastic improvements in survival, especially in oncology.

We're not quite there yet, but obviously artificial intelligence will improve diagnostic accuracy, streamline paperwork, and help us and our patients navigate the complex health system more efficiently to improve patient outcomes.

## Are there any heroes or mentors who have guided your path so far?

All the wise physicians who were multiskilled in both examination and procedures and brilliant diagnosticians, especially Dan O'Donnell at Fremantle, who inspired a generation of junior doctors.

Dan was always a strong patient advocate, an expert in clinical examination, and a wealth of knowledge when it came to dealing with rare or unusual cases. He was always on the lookout for unusual adverse reactions to medications, which were often overlooked by other doctors.

## What's the first issue you would tackle if you were WA Minister for Health?

Cut red tape and reduce paperwork. I'd encourage the reduction of unnecessary or repeated pathology and radiological investigations – which are harmful to the patients, the taxpayer and the environment. This would actually improve productivity by enabling the more important investigations to be done to reduce hospital inpatient stays and outpatient waiting times.



Dr Tony watching Elton John at Glastonbury.

I'd encourage rationalisation of polypharmacy – but importantly encourage the use of value-adding evidence-based treatments, which reduce hospital readmissions and improve patient outcomes. I would drastically reduce the amount of paperwork that all hospital workers have to fill out (e.g. documenting a patient's weight in eight different places!) and cull many of the useless, irrelevant mandatory training modules we're required to do each year.

## How do you spend and prioritise your time away from medicine?

We love to travel overseas, go to concerts (fourth Glastonbury trip last year and first Coachella trip this year), and are passionate but long-suffering Dockers and Western Force members. I find gardening very relaxing, even though I'm not an expert gardener by any stretch (hence the trigger thumb from weeding). Exercise-wise, I find swimming very effective for the bad back from gardening. At night, watching streaming services, especially Britbox.

## What's the one life lesson you always remember?

Assume nothing and double-check everything.

## What's something your patients impressed upon you?

The most important thing patients appreciate is having a doctor explain to them what's happening in a reassuring, concise manner using layman's language, as we are losing the art of effective communication in our digital world. The most common complaint is that "the doctor stared at the computer instead of telling me what was wrong with me".

## What words of wisdom did your parents share with you?

Work hard; save hard; have a good sense of humour; and neither a borrower nor lender be. Plus, an hour of sleep before midnight is worth two after midnight.

## What's your ideal holiday destination?

Niseko in winter. The Balkans in summer. The powder snow is amazing in Hokkaido, and Japanese food is delicious. We were going to go to Yugoslavia in 1992, but sadly war broke out. We made it in 2023. It was an amazing experience, with beautiful scenery and architecture. Plus, they have been making wine for 2,000 years and have perfected that art! ■