

Titans of health retire from major roles

Two of the most senior medical professionals in Western Australia, both long-time members of the AMA (WA), have recently announced their retirement from their roles.

Dr Andy Robertson steps down as Chief Health Officer and Deputy Director General, Public and Aboriginal Health in February, while **Dr Simon Towler** completes his second stint as Chief Medical Officer in March.

Answering the call in challenging times

Dr Robertson has had a 22-year career at WA Health.

His extraordinary career took him from serving as a Royal Australian Navy Biological Weapons Inspector in Iraq to leading WA's health response through its greatest public health challenge in a century – the COVID-19 pandemic.

Dr Robertson joined the WA Department of Health in 2003 as the Director Disaster Preparedness and established a career focused on public health emergency management.

His expertise in that field helped guide Western Australian health policy through the pandemic, where he became a familiar face on television screens across the State, relaying critical health information to the public. He was a key part of the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee, established to lead national health responses to the pandemic.

Prior to the pandemic, Dr Robertson led health sector responses to events such as the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and the 2005 Bali bombings, and undertook emergency deployments after regional earthquakes and the Fukushima nuclear incident. These roles shaped WA's approach to health sector emergency readiness.

Dr Robertson also chaired the Radiological Council of WA, among other duties. He previously served in the Royal Australian Navy for 19 years, providing expertise in disaster management and health protection through international humanitarian deployments.

In a question-and-answer piece for *Medicus* in March 2022, during the pandemic, Dr Robertson was asked about his former role as Director Disaster Preparedness, leading Australian Medical Assistance Teams (AUSMATs) into the

Maldives following the Boxing Day tsunami in 2004 and the earthquake-ravaged Yogyakarta in Indonesia a couple of years later. How did he compare the pressure experienced during those situations to that in WA as we experienced community spread?

"The analogies of a sprint and a marathon are apt," Dr Robertson said.

"The disaster responses are very frenetic for a number of weeks, with a lot of work done in a short period but stabilise after 2-4 weeks. The pressure, in this instance, has been constant, with some exacerbations over the last two years as we managed the different phases of the pandemic."

He was asked what kept him up at night.

"That we have done everything possible to protect the health and safety of the WA population, including all our health staff, through vaccination, masks and restrictions, and that the hospitals are as prepared as they can be to manage the inevitable serious cases," Dr Robertson said.

Premier Roger Cook acknowledged Dr Robertson's significant contributions.

"As Health Minister at the time, I want to personally thank Andy for his leadership, advice, and steadfast intellectual discipline in a globally exemplary response to the pandemic," he said.



Dr Andy Robertson fronting the media during the pandemic.
Photo: WAMN News



Dr Andy Robertson getting his first COVID-19 vaccine.

"His leadership was pivotal during the COVID-19 pandemic – arguably the most significant public health crisis in a century – where he guided the State's response with expertise and resolve.

"Prior to the pandemic, he played key roles in managing health responses to major international emergencies. His commitment during challenging times has been unwavering. I extend my sincere thanks to Dr Robertson for his outstanding service, and I wish him every success in the future."

Award a crowning glory for Simon Towler

Dr Towler won the prestigious Hippocrates Award at last year's AMA (WA) Awards, presented to a doctor who has made an outstanding contribution to health.

Receiving the award, Dr Towler said there was something very special about recognition by your colleagues.

"I'm retiring... I just turned 70, I've been a clinician for 45 years," he said.

"To know that your contribution is acknowledged by your colleagues is very special. As a previous AMA president, I've handed the thing out to somebody; now to receive it is magnificent."



Dr Simon Towler with his Hippocrates Award, with WA Minister for Health and Mental Health Meredith Hammat and AMA (WA) President Dr Kyle Hoath.

As Chief Medical Officer he provided tireless support to the Medical Workforce Unit, with increased Junior Medical Officer recruitment for the Health Service Providers, and advocacy for greater focus on teaching and training to address the vocational training bottleneck, to improve career opportunities for doctors.

He had served as Chief Medical Officer since 2022 until his retirement, and previously performed the same role from 2006-2012. The AMA (WA) President in 2000, Simon worked for several decades as an intensivist at Royal Perth Hospital and Fiona Stanley Hospital.

His appointments include Medical Co-Director at Fiona Stanley Hospital; Clinical Lead, South Metropolitan Health Services Futures Program; State Medical Director of Donate Life WA; Executive Director of Health Policy and Clinical Reform Division, Department of Health; Adjunct Professor at Edith Cowan University and Murdoch University; member of Curtin Medical School Advisory Board; and member of the Board of Palliative Care WA.

He was involved in developing the Clinical Senate and the commissioning of Fiona Stanley Hospital, and oversaw the formation of the WA Health Networks, including the Cancer and Palliative Care Network.

Simon has made a significant contribution to voluntary assisted dying (VAD) as a lawful end-of-life choice for eligible Western Australians. He was a member of the VAD Ministerial Expert Panel that developed recommendations on specific elements for inclusion in the then proposed legislation for VAD. Following the commencement of the legislation in July 2021, Simon was part of the first group of VAD practitioners, and then took on the role of VAD clinical lead in the South Metropolitan Health Service.

As a strong advocate of the importance of workforce wellbeing, he ensured ongoing funding of Doctors for Doctors (Drs4Drs). ■