

OBITUARY

Professor John Robert Sutton MBBS MD PhD DSc FRACP FACSP FRCS FCP (Canada) FCS (Canada)

Born Sydney March 31 1941, Died Sydney February 7 1996, aged 54 years

John Sutton's unexpected death at home on the morning of 7 February 1996 was a loss not just to his friends and family which is significant enough, but to the broad spectrum of those in sports science and sports medicine, and those around the world who pursued outdoor activities such as mountaineering and climbing, with enthusiasm.

First and foremost John Sutton was a family man who was immensely proud of his wife and daughters (Yvonne and Caroline, Joanne and Dianne), and the love this family shared was obvious. John Sutton balanced a hectic schedule of research, teaching, travelling and taking part in events such as cycling across the Simpson Desert of Australia to climbing some of the highest mountains in the world, with family commitments and a genuine enjoyment of life.

John Sutton's research background began at the Garvan Institute at St Vincent's Hospital in Sydney where he did much of the early work on growth hormone physiology and exercise.

In 1972 he left the Garvan Institute to work at McMaster University in Canada and this Canadian experience extended to 17 years until his return to Sydney. His appointment as Dean of the Faculty of Medicine at McMaster University was coincident with his time as President of the American College of Sports Medicine from 1986 to 1987 and, of course, with appointments to committees and councils too numerous to mention.

Perhaps one of John Sutton's more celebrated research projects is the comprehensive high altitude study performed in Canada, called Operation Everest II. Together with Dr Charles Houston, Dr Allen Cymerman and a team of researchers, a decompression chamber was used to simulate a seven week ascent of Mt Everest.

From 1989, he was a Professor in the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Sydney and worked at the Cumberland Campus of the University as Head of the Exercise Research Centre.

He received his doctorate of science from the University of Sydney in 1995 and published more than 300 research journal publications, numerous monologues and chapters in books and seemed to be forever on the lecture circuit sharing his immense knowledge.

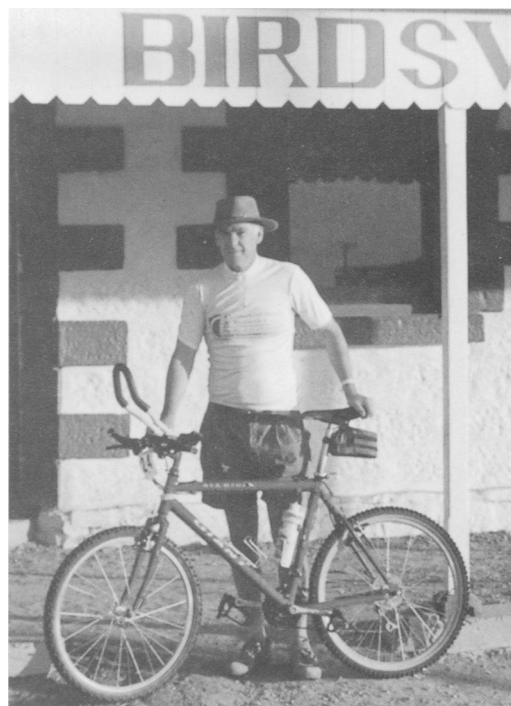
He was famous as a teacher with genuine charisma who loved telling stories and reciting poetry to reinforce the points he made with remarkable clarity.

John Sutton was a most remarkable man. As this obituary is being written, there are already plans being made to name a Chair of Exercise Science in his honour as well as a memorial lecture at Australia's major international Sports Science and Sports Medicine Conference.

Our condolences go to John's family. He shall be missed.

PETER FRICKER

*President, Australian College of Sports Physicians
Director, Medical Services, Australian
Institute of Sport
Professor of Sports Medicine, University
of Canberra*



John Sutton was a truly remarkable man: a teacher, researcher, sports enthusiast and adventurer. He was an international giant in the field of exercise science and sports medicine, but no list of his accomplishments can do justice to his personality, his zest for life,

the stimulation he gave to all who came in contact with him and the affection he inspired.

He graduated in medicine from the University of Sydney in 1965, winning the Robin May prize for leadership and academic excellence. His university education was punctuated by summer vacation work as a guide at Jenolan Caves in NSW, and by hitch hiking across India, Nepal and also China at the time of the Cultural Revolution.

He was always a traveller and adventurer. As a junior doctor he led a mountaineering expedition to the Andes and pursued a developing interest in the medical aspects of exercise. In 1971, he participated in Sydney's City to Surf fun run and subsequently helped write the first description of heat stroke and thermal illness in fun runners.

He had, as he put it, a scientific baptism by fire from Dr Les Lazarus, the founding director of the Garvan Institute at St Vincent's Hospital. Researchers of the time remember John's enthusiasm and dedication. He would often run 6 km to work in the evenings with his Labrador dog as company; this could result in John carrying the dog home if the pace was too much.

Not content with just studying the metabolism of the young Olympians of the 1960s, such as Shane Gould, Sutton would often join in strenuous training sessions.

In 1972, he left the Garvan Institute, where he had been working on the role of hormones in exercise, to further pursue exercise-related research at McMaster University in Canada. This was to be a short stint, but it stretched to 17 years.

Together with Dr Charles S Houston he travelled to Mount Logan in the Yukon in north western Canada every summer between 1973 and 1980 to undertake a variety of physiological studies. There, at 5800 m and in conditions of great discomfort and significant risk, they clarified our understanding of hypoxia (inadequate oxygen supply to body tissues) and altitude sickness.

Sutton was often both researcher and guinea pig – he took biopsies of his own quadriceps muscle during high altitude expeditions. In 1979, he and Houston organised the first of a continuing biennial series of hypoxia symposiums, held in Banff and later Lake Louise, Canada. These symposiums bring together leading scientists and climbers from around the world.

His infectious enthusiasm helped generate the largest and most comprehensive high-altitude study performed – Operation Everest II. Along with Houston, Dr Allen Cymerman and a team of researchers, a decompression chamber was used to simulate a seven-week ascent of that mountain.

John Sutton's research interest was not confined to the cold and high altitudes. He was intensely concerned about recreational running and heat related illness and injury, doing much to alert the sporting world of the risk of hypothermia.

He was always keen to disseminate his findings and helped rewrite the position

statement for the American College of Sports Medicine on exercising in the heat.

He was only the second non-American to be elected president of the American College of Sports Medicine, from 1986 to 1987. He served on the advisory boards of many other institutions and co-founded, with Dr Andrew Pipe, the sports medicine section of the Ontario Medical Association, which named a lecture series in his honour.

John Sutton was more than an internationally respected researcher who loved the challenge of outdoor recreation. In 1986, the Physician and Sports Medicine Journal described him as a Renaissance man, a person who has wide interest and is expert in several areas. He enthralled audiences as a scholar, often weaving his interest in history with the recital of poetry, as he disseminated his knowledge of the scientific aspects of exercise.

Charismatic is perhaps an overworked adjective, but it can unequivocally be applied to John Sutton. His happy, outgoing personality won him many friends around the world, who all held him in high esteem. He had a magnificent zest for life, which he lived to the fullest.

From 1989, he was a professor in the faculty of medicine of the University of Sydney and worked at the Cumberland campus as head of the Exercise Research Centre.

He received a doctorate of science from the University of Sydney and published more than 300 research journal publications, numerous monologues and chapters in books, yet remained unpretentious in sharing his knowledge.

In a busy schedule of work commitments he had a special place for his family, with whom he shared mutual respect, admiration and love.

He unselfishly contributed in so many ways that the full impact of his death is difficult to ascertain.

On Tuesday, February 6, he was enthusiastically discussing the forthcoming scientific expedition, Spirit of Australia – an arduous and hazardous trek by a group of Australians who aim to reach the South Pole overland from the edge of Antarctica, on foot and unsupported. He was scientific adviser and was thinking of taking part in the expedition. The next day, John Sutton, aged 54, died in his sleep in Sydney. The funeral service for family and close friends at Our Lady of the Rosary Church, Kensington, overflowed with mourners – testament to the endearing nature of the man, for he made everyone feel like a friend. He is survived by his wife, Yvonne, and their three daughters, Caroline, Joanne and Dianne.

MARTIN THOMPSON

Dr Martin Thompson worked closely with John Sutton in the department of biomedical sciences, University of Sydney. This obituary was compiled with the help of other colleagues.

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