



# A magnificent obsession



TIRELESS ENERGY, DEDICATION TO DETAIL AND AN ABILITY TO JUGGLE A HERCULEAN WORKLOAD HAVE CATAPULTED PROFESSOR DAVID WEEDON TO THE HEIGHT OF HIS PROFESSION. MELISSA SWEET LOOKS AT WHAT LIES BENEATH.

**B**risbane pathologist Professor David Weedon is famous for many things, including his internationally acclaimed expertise in skin pathology, workaholicism and dry sense of humour.

His obsessiveness is also legendary; indeed he is almost obsessive about acknowledging this trait, and has the evidence ready for display when we meet in his office at Sullivan Nicolaides Pathology in the leafy Brisbane suburb of Taringa.

First exhibit is his bare desk. It is always left spotless, he declares proudly. Years ago, after finishing a stint at the celebrated Mayo Clinic in the United States, he was presented with a miniature dissection board “because I was known for being so obsessive about it always being kept clean”.

Next exhibit is a spoon, engraved “Weedon’s spoon. Hands off.” It was a present from medical students working at Sullivan Nicolaides, Professor Weedon explains, because of his insistence that no-one else use his utensil in the tea-room.

"I don't mind being known as obsessive," he says. "Obsessiveness goes with being a pathologist – one has to be."

It is a Monday morning but Professor Weedon has already completed a full shift – as usual, he started work the previous evening, finishing his last pathology report by 6am. He works through the night so the days can be devoted to other projects, whether teaching, writing or chairing committees – and it also means a speedy response for referring doctors and their patients.

Most days he grabs no more than four hours sleep, and it is not unusual for 24 hours to pass without a snooze.

"I do feel tired all the time," he says, admitting a tendency towards irritability. "I am sure it affects my health."

Professor Weedon has, however, been known to nod off while queuing through the night to purchase newly released banknotes. An avid collector, he has sold most of his coin and banknote collections but continues to amass glassworks, paintings and watches.

He stopped stockpiling elephants because "people start giving you cheap ones for Christmas so you are burdened by variants you don't want".

When asked if his glass collection includes vases, he responds drily: "You don't ever use the word 'vase'. It's 'tall forms'. I have a few tall forms. I try to avoid tall forms because too many of them look like vases."

### A life less ordinary

Last Christmas, Professor Weedon received a copy of an autobiography, *Morbid: A Pathologist's Life*, from Dr Alastair Burry, who was Director of Pathology when the young Weedon was training at Royal Brisbane Hospital in the 1960s. It is inscribed: "To my best pupil. Didn't he do well!"

Dr Burry writes in the book of the trainee setting a standard that "his fellows struggled to emulate".

"His witty and novel paper on acne convulsed the audience with laughter and was followed by loud stamping of approval," he adds.

Asked why he chose to specialise in pathology, Professor Weedon is quick to reply: "Because I hate people."

This is only partly a joke – he then admits to finding clinical medicine "demanding emotionally" – but it suggests that Professor Weedon's dry, self-

deprecating humour could easily obscure his achievements.

As one associate notes, he manages a workload that would normally exhaust three people – hence the 'Superman' cake colleagues once bought to celebrate his birthday.

But computers are one domain Professor Weedon has not mastered – his loyal secretary of 20 years, Pam Kent, runs his email program – so he may not realise the multitude of glowing reviews revealed by a Google search for the second edition of his landmark text, *Skin Pathology*.

"The author, who is a well acknowledged, world known expert in this field has to be commended for having painstakingly undertaken this gigantic task of not only updating his previous edition but who seems to have given his 'all' to produce this masterpiece," says one review.

The third edition, now in development, will be even more extensive, citing at least 30,000 references, while Professor Weedon's book on the pathology of the gall bladder is also much cited.

Other career highlights include taking the first photograph of apoptosis in a skin cell in 1978, and becoming one of a handful of non-Americans to be made an honorary member of the College of American Pathologists, as well as a regular on the international lecture circuit.

### A vision splendid

Apart from his many medical commitments, Professor Weedon has also been politically active. He was prominent in student politics at the University of Queensland and later joined the Liberal Party (which once considered him for a Senate vacancy), until resigning his membership in 1983, when he became Queensland president of the AMA.

He remains close to a former AMA colleague, Federal Minister for Defence Dr Brendan Nelson, who last year appointed him to chair a national inquiry into medical education.

But Professor Weedon is not easy to pigeonhole politically.

He hated being federal president of the AMA, largely because of the intrusive media demands.

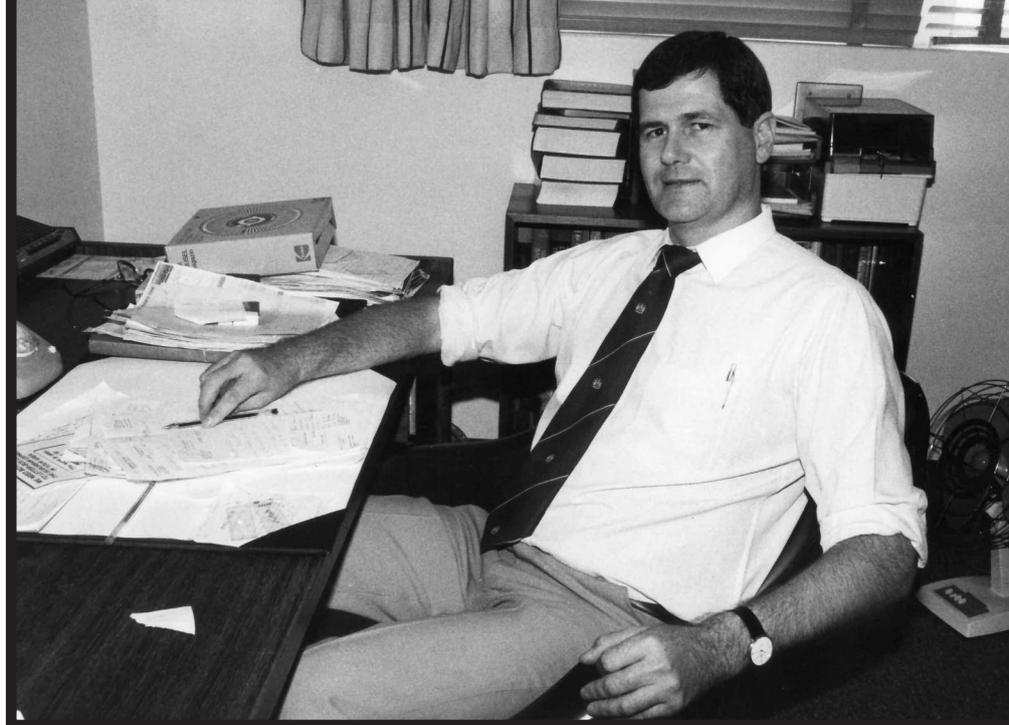
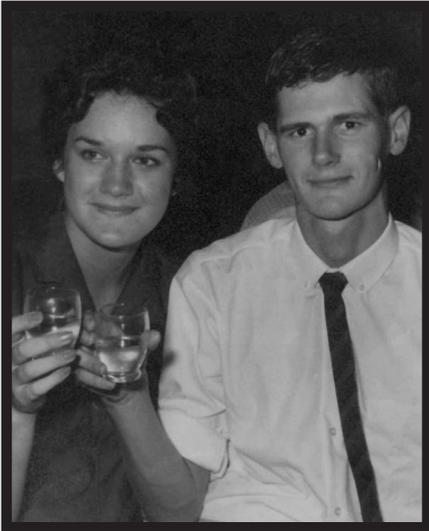
"I am not particularly good at thinking on my feet," he says. "I think of all the right things (to say) after the event."

## CV in brief

PROFESSOR DAVID DE VAUX WEEDON, AO  
(OFFICER OF THE ORDER OF AUSTRALIA)

1964	BMedSc (Pathology)
1966	MBBS (First-class Honours)
1983–1984	President, Queensland branch, Australian Medical Association
1995–1996	President, Australian Medical Association
1996–	Member, Professional Standards Review Panel
1998–2001	Chair, Medicare Services Advisory Committee
2001–2003	President, Royal College of Pathologists of Australasia
2004–	Chair, Prostheses and Devices Committee
2005–	Chair, Steering Committee for the Medical Education Study
2006	Bond University Student Council Award for Academic Excellence





***Making a difference: In his uni days Professor Weedon was active in student politics, later joining the Liberal Party before heading the AMA.***

He has been a greenie since “before it was fashionable”, and believes it may be difficult for the Howard Government to win the next election because of its slowness to embrace environmental issues.

“I think the future is absolutely dismal,” he says. “This generation has used millions of years worth of the earth’s basic biologic products. The current generation, from about 1950 on, has just been profligate.”

Professor Weedon also feels passionately about the “immorality” of banks allowing customers to accrue huge credit-card debts, the limitations of problem-based learning in medical schools, and the need for national healthcare reform.

“I am a very strong believer that the states exist to name football teams only,” he says. “The states promote non-cohesiveness in a nation.”

In an ideal world, he says, Australia would be divided into 10 different regions responsible for healthcare delivery, with local representation on regional boards working to national policies.

Not that he expects such changes in his lifetime. At 65, Professor Weedon is obliged to retire as a Sullivan Nicolaides partner at the end of June, but no-one expects him to retire from his many other careers – pathologist, writer, teacher, committee chair – anytime soon.

No-one, least of all the man himself, can even imagine him taking a long holiday. He recently cashed out 13 weeks of vacation leave.

“The last major holiday was to write the last edition of the [Skin Pathology] book,” he says. “I can’t recall ever having more than one week’s holiday of relaxation.”

### Just your regular superguy

On Friday mornings, after another night’s work, Professor Weedon grabs a McDonald’s hamburger for breakfast. He eats it, tea towel across lap, while driving to Bond University at the Gold Coast. There he gives lectures, tutorials or works on the pathology museum, named in his honour, that he has set up.

Last year, he won the Bond University Student Council Award for Academic Excellence and, according to Professor Chris Del Mar, Dean of the Faculty of Health Sciences and Medicine, is extremely popular with students, not least because he pays for their colour photocopies of his handouts to ensure they have the best possible materials.

Professor Weedon’s work at Bond University is honorary.

“I don’t take any money so they can’t control me,” he says, in what seems another half-joke. But it doesn’t obscure another of his well-known traits.

“The most defining characteristic of David is his enormous generosity,” says a Sullivan Nicolaides colleague, Dr Richard Williamson, who was taught by Professor Weedon at the University of Queensland in the 1980s.

Professor Weedon is known for being generous with both his time – including tutoring individual students – and his purse. Many have benefited from his largesse.

Ms Kent, who has worked for him for almost 20 years, says he is liked and respected by staff because of his willingness to help and his lack of grandstanding.

“The side that impresses staff the most is that he will get in and do the most menial of tasks,” she says.

“When we had a flood and water coming inside the building, the first person out there in the rain, clearing the drain with his hands, was Dr Weedon.”

Professor Weedon once bought a hamburger shop on the Gold Coast to help set up a friend; when the arrangement didn’t work out, he was known to lend a hand in the kitchen after finishing his pathology shift.

It’s a safe bet that he also took the opportunity to indulge his sweet tooth – he is not remotely health conscious, despite having type 2 diabetes (“like the rest of the world”) and having had open heart surgery.

Professor Weedon feigns horror when asked if he exercises.

“Heavens no,” comes the quick reply, “I run down people and leap to conclusions.”

No wonder so many colleagues call it a pleasure to work with someone they affectionately tease as a “grumpy old man”. 🍌