



Is there a Doctor in the house?

Members take centre stage

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Doctor in the house?



Every year, a group of multi-talented doctors takes to the stage to create some work-life balance – and to practise the healing art of laughter.



“In medicine, someone can take your place. In creativity, you are unique.”

Dr John Gillies,
musician and painter.

In 1979 Dr John Gillies heard about an international organisation of doctors who were also artists. Intrigued, he wrote and asked for more information. “They wrote back to me in Spanish,” says John, “and when I got the letter translated I was surprised to discover it said, ‘Congratulations, we’ve appointed you president of The New Zealand Association of Artist Doctors’. So I thought ‘Oh, well, I’ll give it a go.’”

Despite being press-ganged into his new role, John took up the challenge with enthusiasm. He decided to organise an annual concert for doctors, with the focus not on artistic excellence but on fostering a sense of fellowship in the medical community.

The first concert was held in 1990. John knew he was onto something when the 200 tickets sold out in just four days.

AN EAGERLY AWAITED EVENT

Since then, The New Zealand Association of Artist Doctors’ annual concert in Christchurch has become one of the most enjoyable and eagerly awaited events on the calendar. Many medical professionals who were initially reluctant to take part are now among its staunchest supporters. Some have re-discovered musical interests they’d put aside in medical school, while others have taken up singing or learnt to play an instrument especially to take part.

John, who was a consultant physician in respiratory medicine at Christchurch Hospital until his retirement two years ago, has developed various innovative and cunning techniques to get people involved. “When I was teaching students, I’d say to them, ‘Hand

up those of you who want to pass at the end of the year. Okay, you’ll all be singing in the choir at the concert this year, then.’”

BURLY BLOKES IN TUTUS

A stroke of genius was to recreate the infamous Selwyn Ballet – a bunch of burly blokes, dressed in tutus, attempting scenes from the likes of Swan Lake. The event brought the house down. “I’ve never heard so much laughing in my life,” says John.

Over the years, the concert’s line-up has grown to include a rock band, a jazz band, a wind ensemble, a choir, an orchestra, comedians and a novelty act called Medical Manpower. There is also an art and craft display. Previous displays have included anything from paintings and photographs to guitars, sun dials, grandfather clocks and model boats.

John, who joined MAS as a student, used to dance in the concert – until he injured his knee – and is a drummer in the rock band. He also shows his paintings in the arts and craft show. John is passionate about painting. Later this year, a Christchurch gallery will show an exhibition of around 60 of John’s portraits of well-known Cantabrians.

WORK-LIFE BALANCE

“I think having an interest outside medicine is very important, both for work-life balance and to give you a chance to express your creativity,” says John. “In medicine, if you fall over someone else can take your place. In creativity, you are unique. That’s why it’s so rewarding.”

There have been a few artist doctor events in Dunedin, but sporadic attempts to hold

“We aim to lower the tone and raise the laughter”

Stephen Mark, dancer,
Medical Manpower

events in Auckland and Wellington have not come off. Having Medlab South come on board as a sponsor helped ensure the survival of Christchurch’s annual concert, but John believes the key to its success has been to aim for “superb mediocrity”.

If the standard is uniformly excellent, he says, many potential performers may be too intimidated to take part. “If someone is playing a piano concerto, I expect them to put a bum note in it. If they’re singing, I expect them to occasionally drift off key. We’ve sometimes aimed too high in the past, and have had to bring the standard back down.”

a break from this year’s show, but they’re looking forward to being back next year.

“We think of ourselves as being like an act in a capping show – we aim to lower the tone and raise the laughter levels,” says Stephen.

Stephen is a urologist, as are most of the other 12–14 performers who perform as Medical Manpower. Previous themes have included The Rocky Horror Picture Show, Chicago, and a version of the dance and percussion show Stomp.

“Our act basically involves removing 90% of our clothing to choreographed music,” says Stephen. “Stomp was the most difficult act we’ve ever done. It involved brooms, tap dancing, throwing buckets around and using angle grinders – which almost set the place on fire with their sparks.”

Stephen, who also joined MAS as a student, says neither he nor any of his co-performers have a background in music. Nor, he says, do



“The sound isn’t always fantastic but the fun is.”

Professor Tim Wilkinson,
orchestra and jazz band



RAISING LAUGHTER LEVELS

Aiming too high isn’t something Stephen Mark and his co-performers in the group Medical Manpower need to worry about. Injuries and a few absences among the group have meant that Medical Manpower are taking

they have much of a sense of rhythm, which adds to the challenge.

“I guess we look on the show as a bit of public humiliation on a regular basis,” says Stephen. “But it does give us a kick to pull it off.”

COMEBACK TUTUS

The origins of the Selwyn Ballet lie in a capping event performed many years ago by medical students from the Selwyn College Residential Hall. When John Gillies realised many of the dancers still lived in the area, he decided a comeback was in order. An

event that was hilarious in its day became a real side-splitter when performed by the, now, much older and well respected senior consultants in their tutus! It has since been performed several times – always to capacity laughter.

FRIENDS WITH SHARED PURPOSE

For Professor Tim Wilkinson, a geriatrician and Associate Dean at Christchurch School of Medicine and Health Sciences, the Association’s concert gave him an opportunity to rediscover his enjoyment of performance.

About five years ago, after playing the flute in the orchestra, Tim decided to take up the double bass. He now plays the double bass in the orchestra, and in a 16-piece jazz band he formed for last year’s concert.

Music is a family interest – Tim’s wife, Lynette Murdoch, a GP, and their two teenage sons also play – and Tim has joined several other jazz groups.

“I remember hearing someone say that it’s important to have a ‘consuming’ hobby, and music has certainly become that for me,” says Tim, who joined MAS about five years ago.

“Being in an ensemble widens your circle of friends and gives you a shared sense of purpose.”

This year The New Zealand Association of Artist Doctors played to a full house at Christchurch Repertory Theatre on 31 October – just before we went to print. The reviews were, as always, excellent.

By Linley Boniface
Photo Credit: John Lyftogt

