

M.O. TEAM IS DOWN TO EARTH

By Peter Kowalick

WORKING again with a colleague after 33 years of going separate ways could be expected to be a time of considerable readjustment for most people.

But for two medical men with a single purpose, the pooling of their 66 years of experience is proving of immense benefit to AFP members.

Dr Don Smyth and Dr Mike Dwyer are Commonwealth Medical Officers looking after the health interests of members. Don Smyth has been with the job since he joined the ACT Force in 1979.

Mike Dwyer took up his new post as Director of Medical Services in January this year.

Now, together, they are working on developing a comprehensive medical facility for AFP members, building on their many years of experience attending to the needs of men and women in other services.

Doctors Dwyer and Smyth last worked together in 1952 when they graduated from Sydney University with a wide medical future before them.

Both went into hospitals — Don Smyth for two years and Mike Dwyer for four. But then their paths diverged. Dr Smyth took to travel, spending the next six years on Nauru Island, followed by another two in Fiji. Dr Dwyer remained in Sydney, finally becoming clinical superintendent at Mater Hospital.

Here, their careers diverged even further for a time. Don Smyth joined the RAAF as medical officer in 1962, to gain flying service experience. But when a directive came out from RAAF staff that medics were not to be allowed to fly — “they were too scarce” — he decided it was not for him and resigned his position.

A year later, the directive was withdrawn. Overseas defence thinking encouraged the development of medical facilities which could follow the troops anywhere into action, by all means possible. Australian defence authorities had a rethink.

So Don Smyth was back in the Air Force — and flying. He served all round Australia, in Thailand and in Vietnam where he had two tours of duty, in 1967 and again in 1971–73. On his return, he became CO of the School of Aviation Medicine at Point Cook, his last position before joining the Force.

Mike Dwyer left Mater Hospital to begin 25 years in general practice at Gosford. During that time he also was in the Army Reserve as medical officer.

He served in Vietnam in 1968–69 at First Australian Field Hospital and later in Irian Jaya (in 1977) as medical officer with an Army Survey Squadron.

He left general practice in 1980 to transfer to the Regular Army. His last military posting was as Colonel of Preventive Medicine at the Directorate of Army Health Services. I talked to them together about their reunion after 33 years. They tossed reminiscences back and forth like two men who have seen a lot of life and its problems.

I asked about plans for the AFP's medical future. Mike Dwyer looked thoughtful.

“It's our intention to create a four-section facility for the AFP that will provide a number of benefits,” he said. “The first is a clinical medical service to members of the Force. We see ourselves as being just like a Regimental Medical Officer for the AFP.”

“Armed forces service has provided us with both an insight into what members' duties involve and the problems that are likely to arise in an organisation where members are subjected to all kinds of pressures and strains.



• Doctors Don Smyth and Mike Dwyer.

They are also deeply involved in providing a forensic medical service and setting medical standards for entrance to the AFP.

“We've both had extensive experience in all these areas,” Dr Dwyer said.

“Our biggest concern at present is to make members aware that they have a medical service available to them on which they can call whenever they have a need,” he said. “By providing members with a readily available facility we are able to help solve or relieve their health problems and at the same time build up a comprehensive official personal medical record which they are able to take with them when the time comes to leave the Force. “It works very well in the armed services, much to the benefit of members,” he added.

“Although we are based in Canberra it is our intention to visit major centres such as Sydney and Melbourne with recruiting teams so that members in the regions who wish to discuss problems will have the opportunity to do so,” he said.

Such dedication could be expected to take up a lot of a doctor's time.

“True,” said Don Smyth. “But we still find time for our own interests.”

Again, those interests come fairly close. Both men have a deep interest in flying. Dr Dwyer also is a qualified glider pilot.

“I have kept my light aircraft licence current,” he said. “My son is a commercial pilot and keeps me up to the mark.”

He also is interested in the AFP's Coastwatch role.

“This interest is directed towards the people involved and how they work,” he said. “I am specifically looking at the medical aspects of the survival kits which are part of the Coastwatch equipment.”

Don Smyth's link with flying goes back to his RAAF days. He was one of the last medics in the RAAF to be checked out on World War II aircraft.

“I had lots of flying then,” he said. These days he's content to spend his spare moments at the hobby he was attracted to in those early years — smithing.

“I like to make things in silver, copper or iron,” he said. His experience with the Air Force has stood him in good stead in that respect. He's something of an expert in welding alloys, the types of metals used in the manufacture of aircraft.

Together Dr Mike Dwyer and Dr Don Smyth plan to weld together the AFP's medical directorate into an active and responsive unit to meet all the needs of every member of the Force.

They believe they have a head start in achieving their objective, thanks to the vast experience they've gained in their past service careers.

“We'll be working closely together to that end,” said Mike Dwyer.