

MEDICO RETIRES

by Paul Lewer

THE doctor who rid the island of Nauru of leprosy by misreading a drug dose retired from the AFP this month.

'I was just out of university and was using a new anti-leprosy drug,' Dr Don Smyth told 'Platypus'.

'I gave my patients ten times the dose I should have; it made some of them ill but it cured all the leprosy!'

Dr Smyth was a forensic medical officer, based at the city police station in Canberra, since 1979.

He said his time with the AFP had taught him what a magnificent job police did under very trying circumstances.

'Overall, the police do an excellent job and I've enjoyed my time with the AFP because of the standard of personnel,' he said.

After flying fighters for the RAAF in the South West Pacific in the Second World War, Dr Smyth studied medicine at Sydney University where he graduated in 1952.

'I went to Nauru to save money to go to England to become the world's greatest surgeon but the place was so challenging I stayed six years instead of the original two I intended,' he said.

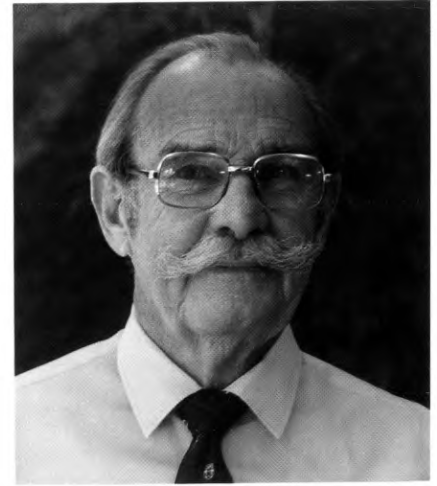
'After four years I went back to Sydney University and did a diploma of tropical medicine and hygiene.

'Apart from clearing up all the leprosy I also rid the island of elephantitis — but that was by the correct scientific method!

'At that stage Nauru was a UN territory under an Australian mandate. There were about 5,000 people on the island and I was the only doctor with the administration. The only other doctor on the island worked for the then British Phosphate Commission.

'I felt like staying there for the rest of my life but Nauru was very remote then. There was no airstrip and it took about 10 days to get to Australia by ship.

'I was running out of new things to learn and decided to go to the UK to try to become a surgeon,' he said.



Dr Smyth (Picture by Terry Browne)

But Dr Smyth did not realise that ambition.

'I passed the first part of the examination but I ran out of money and I found that an old back injury from university days didn't allow me to stand over an operating table six to eight hours a day. Although I didn't complete my surgery exams I did complete a diploma in industrial Health at London University,' he said.

Dr Smyth's sterling work on Nauru did bring an unexpected dividend while he was in Europe.

'While on the island I operated on the wife of the Director of Education, Mr George Pitman. They were very pleased with the result and being noted linguists they taught me French by the Pitman method, pointing out that they had a relative in France with a practice who might be able to use my services while I was in Europe.

'I thought no more about it until I had a call from a doctor near Lyon when I was in London. I spent two very pleasant weeks as a locum in France.

'I had also treated the Pitman's daughter's childhood illnesses on Nauru.

'She's now working as a social worker at Woden Valley Hospital in Canberra — which only shows how small the world can be!

'After 18 months in London I bought a general practice in Fiji where I worked for two years before rejoining the Air Force in 1964 on the preventive medicine side. One of the highlights of my Air Force service was two and a half years as an exchange officer with the United States Air Force,' he said. The AFP's well-travelled medico plans to spend his retirement at Malua Bay on the New South Wales South Coast.

'I'll be playing golf and digging a vegetable patch for my wife,' he said.

'Platypus' — and doubtless those grateful inhabitants of Nauru — wish you a happy retirement, 'Doc'.



Dr Smyth and friend, South-west Pacific, WWII.