



James (Jim) Ainslie Begg

The Begg clan of Southland-Otago has produced many doctors. Jim Begg was a prominent and respected psychiatrist with a keen sense of his Scottish heritage. He was medical superintendent of Christchurch's Sunnyside Hospital during the transformation of mental illness treatments worldwide. He died recently, aged 89.



While always seeking, testing and implementing new ideas in psychiatry, Begg clung fondly to his farming background at Wyndham, near Invercargill, and Caledonian culture.

He was born in Dunedin and attended Columba College, when boys were still admitted at what is now a girls' school. His secondary schooling was at John McGlashan College and he studied medicine at Otago University, graduating in 1946.

As a fifth-year student, he was posted to Greymouth as chief medical officer. Son Evan wonders if this was penance for choosing medical studies instead of going to World War II.

He married Nonie Leggatt, of Nelson, in 1947. They had six children but daughter Shona died in 2001.

Begg started work as a hospital doctor and a GP in Wellington, Hawera and Epsom, in the UK. He studied psychiatry in Edinburgh for 18 months and began work in that speciality at Nelson's Ngawhatu Hospital.

He became principal psychiatrist at Seacliff-Cherry Farm, near Dunedin, in 1960. This position involved consulting work at Dunedin, Balclutha and Kew (Invercargill) hospitals and lecturing at Otago University. His final move was to Christchurch in 1965, as principal psychiatrist at Sunnyside, where he served for 20 years until his retirement. He became medical superintendent and was visiting consultant to Ashburton and Timaru hospitals.

Begg's career spanned a time of great change in the treatment of psychiatric illness. He was at the forefront of change, developing systems for patients to play a part in their own management. He introduced the "therapeutic community" approach, mixing age groups and sexes in educational, recreational and social activities, including art and music.

He expanded outpatient, group therapy and day-ward services, using increased community and volunteer assistance. His work in forensic psychiatry through the 1970s led to consulting work with the Justice Department, involving him in big police investigations. He led the adolescent unit in the early 1980s and remained involved with it for several years after his retirement at age 65.

Further study in the US in 1973 helped him handle the changes that came with the move to discharge hospital patients and the establishment of community-based care and rehabilitation systems. He was on several committees involved with the changes and was chairman of the Psychogeriatric Advisers Committee.

His working life was one of long hours and little time for leisure. Daughter Alison says her father gave time to patients, who visited him at home. However, he always managed to fit in family time. He took the family on many camping and caravanning trips and passed on his love of the outdoors.

He made up for his busy working years in retirement, as an avid outdoors man, music lover and traveller, brimming with the joy of living and socialising. Daughter Bronwen remembers family camping and boating excursions at Lake Rotoiti, around New Year. Her father continued to go there in later years. His tramping and climbing feats, such as scaling Mt Robert at 87, would have daunted many young people.

Evan says that after Nonie died in 1991, “Dad revved up and lived life even faster”. He launched into tramping and skiing “with great gusto”. He joined many choirs and through that, met his second wife, Jessie. They married in 1998.

Always he played the bagpipes. Begg loved to get back to his Scottish roots, donning his kilt and piping in the haggis. This he did at the 90th reunion of Knox College, his Otago hall of residence. He played at many functions. For many years, and even at 89, he piped in the performers at the annual Doctors’ Concert. He played the organ, too, often doing so at hospital Christmas services.

Begg maintained close affinity with the family farm, Wyndham Station, in Southland. He was passionate to see it remain in family hands.

Evan says his father’s “special characteristics were impeccable honesty and integrity, never saying anything nasty about anyone, and amazing positivity. He always enjoyed a joke. Above all, he was hugely enthusiastic about everything. He was a larger-than-life character.”

James Ainslie Begg, born Dunedin, 21 August 1920; died Christchurch 24 June, 2010. Pre-deceased by wife Nonie and daughter Shona; survived by wife Jessie; sons Evan and Robert; daughters Bronwen, Alison and Hilary; and his grandchildren.

Mike Crean wrote this obituary; it first appeared in The Press newspaper (Christchurch).