Ronald James Methven, the first full-time Consultant Child Psychiatrist to the Auckland Hospital died aged 86 on the 23rd of August 2014. He was the founding father of child mental health services in Auckland.
Jim, as everyone called him, and the name he preferred, was born in Nelson on the 5th August 1928 the older of the two children of Ronald Henley Methven MA (1897-1944) and Ethel Mary Methven née Peck MA (1901-1985). His father, connected to the well-known South Island Methven family, had been born in New Zealand. Jim’s mother was English born and came to New Zealand in her teens with her own father, Frank Peck FRIBA, the English architect who designed Nelson Cathedral.

Jim’s parents both graduated from the University of New Zealand in 1923 after attending Canterbury University College. His father taught at Nelson College from 1924 to 1944. He was Senior French master and Housemaster of Domett from the inception of the House system in 1928. His mother also taught at Nelson College as a relief teacher 1940-44 and 1947-49, and was a Member of the Board of Governors 1952-55.

Jim attended Nelson College and was in Chaytor House. He was an outstanding swimmer-Junior (1943), Intermediate (1944) and Senior (1945) School Champion winning School “blues” for swimming in 1944 and 1945. He represented Nelson at the New Zealand Amateur Swimming Championships in 1944.

Early in 1945 Jim, now in the sixth form, left school because his father had died in 1944 and he felt the need to support his mother and sister financially. He became apprenticed to Hinchcliffe’s, a Nelson chemist, and took the Diploma in Pharmacy in 1949 and worked in Palmerston North and Nelson Public Hospitals. Not entirely happy at the prospect of a life in hospital or in retail pharmacy Jim switched to medicine, graduating MB ChB (NZ) in 1957 from Otago University.

While a junior doctor at Nelson Hospital (1958-59) Jim decided to specialise in psychiatry. In 1960 he entered the training programme of the Victoria State Mental Health Authority with medical officer posts at Ararat Hospital (1960) and Larundel Hospital (1961-3). He took the University of Melbourne Diploma in Psychological Medicine in 1963. Deciding to become a child psychiatrist he took further postgraduate training at the Royal Melbourne Children's Hospital, 1963-65. His last post in Australia was Consultant Psychiatrist at the Observatory Child Psychiatry Clinic in Melbourne.
Jim returned to Auckland in 1966 to be Director of the New Zealand Department of Health’s Child Health Clinic at Marinoto and to provide outpatient and liaison services to Princess Mary Hospital. In 1970, the Child and Family Unit (CFU) opened to provide the inpatient service. This was based in Ward 12, an aged stand-alone building in the grounds of Auckland Hospital near the Princess Mary Hospital. The upper admission age of 14 years was soon raised to 15 then to 17. The disorders treated necessarily extended to include schizophrenia, bipolar illness and anorexia nervosa. The catchment area expanded to all New Zealand and the service became a national inpatient service for some 10 years until child psychiatry services developed in the other main centres. In 1993 the CFU moved into the new Starship Children’s Hospital.

In 1970 Jim was joined by John Werry as a part-time consultant. John had been appointed Professor of Psychiatry in 1970 and brought the academic and research outlook into child psychiatry. The CFU taught child psychiatry to medical students and to trainees in child psychiatry and in paediatrics.

Jim did no personal research, preferring to develop the service and to participate in the educational efforts of the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists. This resulted in a training programme in Auckland leading to a qualification in child psychiatry. The Faculty of Child Psychiatry was the first sub-specialty within the College; for his work Jim received a College citation 1973.

Jim and John maintained a close, harmonious working relationship based on mutual respect and clear domains of responsibility. Jim retired in 1993.

Jim’s concerns apart from psychiatry included the possibility of a nuclear holocaust. He believed nuclear war to be the pre-eminent threat to the survival of humankind and he opposed the proliferation of nuclear weapons. To further his opposition he joined the New Zealand Affiliate of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW) and was Chairman from 1993 to 1999. With Erich Geiringer he represented New Zealand at IPPNW conferences in Moscow (1987), Hiroshima (1989) and Mexico City (1993).
The writings of the great philosophers exercised Jim in his later years extending a life-long interest in philosophy. He shared his reflections with his friends by leading monthly seminars of the West Auckland U3A called Great Ideas.

Jim was twice married. In 1957 he married Jeanette (Jan) McKenzie; they had three children, Anne, Mark and David. They divorced in 1994. In 1995 Jim married Kate Hyde-Smith. Jim is survived by Kate; by Jeanette and the three children of their marriage; by three step-children from Kate's former marriage; nine grand-children, two great grand-children and his sister Dorothy Carmody.

Jim’s legacy is the child mental health service in Auckland employing today over 500 staff. Jim was a true pioneer with an influence extending to the rest of New Zealand and to Australia.

John Werry
Brian Barraclough

29th October 2014

Still are thy pleasant voices, thy nightingales, awake;
For Death, he taketh all away, but them he cannot take.

RONALD JAMES METHVEN