

Professor John Cawte had an extraordinary passion for the human condition that permeated every aspect of his long professional life and made him an innovator in the fields of transcultural psychiatry and medical anthropology. His mentors included anthropologist Margaret Mead and Kamilaroi elder Bill Reid and students in his psychiatry lectures were more likely to learn about Shakespearian tragedy, Picasso or Munch than the functioning of the cerebral cortex. His belief that doctors working with Indigenous people had to understand and respect the different cultural and spiritual belief systems of their patients – a given today – was revolutionary for its time, as was his recognition of the important role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workers, whose profession he championed. A hugely influential figure internationally throughout the 1960s and 70s, his work was less known in Australia and on occasion even disparaged by his colleagues who showed little interest in Indigenous mental health.

John Ewart Cawte was born in Adelaide in 1925 but spent much of his childhood in the small coastal town of Streaky Bay on the Eyre Peninsular where his father, Fred Cawte, was the head teacher of the local school. His mother, Francis Hartvigsen was of Danish descent and John remained proud of his Danish heritage throughout his life. During his time at Streaky Bay, John came into contact with local Pitjantjatjara, who he would later recall, “were kind and pleasant to me, a little white-headed boy, despite their poverty, and I went on walks with them”. It was the first of many journeys.

After graduating from Adelaide University Medical School, John undertook postgraduate training as a Harkness Fellow at Johns Hopkins and Harvard Universities where he was introduced to pioneering ideas on community-based psychiatry and on the influence of culture and personality on psychiatric disorder. His decision to specialise in psychiatry on his return to Australia was greatly discouraged by his colleagues, however he took up a position as superintendent at Enfield Receiving House in 1952 where he remained for eleven years. His experiences during that period are eloquently described in his memoir *Last of the Lunatics*. In 1952 he married Mary Robinson whom he met at university – she had been studying Botany. During his time at Enfield, John once more came into contact with Indigenous Australians, this time as patients, removed from their homelands and families with little or no English, no interpreters and often highly distressed. Long before the term “culturally appropriate” was coined, John knew that he could not adequately understand and treat Indigenous patients through a purely western lens. For the rest of his career he would spend all his free time travelling to remote communities to observe, learn and work with Indigenous people. He quickly recognised the important role traditional healers had both in healing but also in preserving social order. His book *Medicine is the Law: Studies in Psychiatric Anthropology in East Arnhem Land* examined the way traditional healing practices sustain communities under stress through case studies of eight Warlpiri traditional healers.

In 1962 John moved to Sydney where he took up the position of senior specialist and helped to establish the School of Psychiatry under the leadership of Leslie Kiloh. A few years later John established the School of Community Medicine. He continued to work closely with Aboriginal communities, both along the Eastern Seaboard and in the Top End. He had a long association with the Yolngu people of East Arnhem Land and travelled there each year to provide medical care and to continue his own

education. He formed close relationships with key community members who would remain life-long friends and mentors.

During the 1960s John developed The Arid Zone Project with the aim of documenting the extent and nature of psychiatric morbidity in western NSW and then developing methods of alleviating it. The AZP was inclusive of all people who resided in western NSW but it had a special focus on Aboriginal people who had the worst health status in Australia. The epicentre of the AZP was Bourke. It began in 1967 and continued for over 30 years. It was a pioneering project for Australia and it became a model for how a university could develop a partnership with a needy community. Many UNSW academics became involved and formed warm relationships with Aboriginal leaders. These leaders would go to Sydney and be hosted by John and other UNSW professors. Being treated as equals was something of a new experience for the Bourke Aborigines and one that widened their views of 'Gubbas' (Gubberment men).

The AZP brought new approaches to improving the health and wellbeing of Bourke Aborigines. This included a Headstart program aimed at improving the language skills of preschool Aboriginal (and non-Aboriginal) children, community development, political activity, a housing co-operative, selecting and training Aboriginal Health Workers and a focus on common diseases such as diabetes and trachoma. Fred Hollows developed his passion to eradicate the blinding disease, trachoma, from Aborigines in the whole of Australia through being invited to be the "eye part" of the AZP.

It was also a pathfinder in setting up decentralised medical education, now widely accepted through the medium of Rural Clinical Schools that are found all over Australia.

It was during this period that John began to recognise that Aboriginal health workers, then referred to as paramedics or camp aids, had a vital role in providing front line clinical services in their communities as well as helping to bridge the cultural gap in understanding by western health staff. In 1977 John founded the *Aboriginal Health Worker*, a quarterly journal that provided health information in accessible English along with a vehicle for Aboriginal health workers to publish their work. Today the *Aboriginal and Islander Health Worker Journal* is in its third decade of national publication.

The 70s and 80s were important decades in reshaping the delivery of health services for Indigenous Australians, through hard-fought political campaigns. In some ways John's work, particularly his anthropological approach, became a casualty of this period of flux, when the arena of mental health became highly contested and very fraught. Even though he was a Fellow of the University of Hawaii and the Stanford University in the US and a Distinguished Fellow of the American Psychiatric Association, he still described himself as "a marginal man" both in his cross-cultural approach to his work and his advocacy for dedicated mental health services for Indigenous people. After his attempts to found an Aboriginal mental health association were stymied, John turned his attention to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Deaths in Custody and wrote lengthy submissions on the need for increased opportunities for Indigenous people to train as mental health workers. Today, Social and Emotional Well-Being is a recognised qualification for Indigenous

health workers and is taught across the country and the broader concept of Indigenous specific services to address the psychological impact of dispossession and upheaval now underpins most policy development.

John was an initiated member of the Warramirri clan from Elcho Island, where he had visited for over twenty years. It was Warramirri elders who later asked him to help record some of their healing practices, both for posterity but also as a way of bridging the gap between two cultures. This became *The Universe of the Warrimiri* followed several years later by *Healers of Arnhem Land*; beautifully photographed books which describe traditional practices concerned with religion and healing in a style that would be repeated many years later in the film *The Ten Canoes*. For the Warramirri, the purpose of the publications was very clear:

Why have we one this? Why have we revealed our secrets? Our tribal leaders...held many meetings and we decided we should supply cultural Aboriginal designs for the public buildings of Australia. We want to make this an entry point for Aboriginal people to European culture and an entry for European people to Aboriginal culture. How can the people and the government in Australia respect Aboriginal law and culture if we hide it in the jungle or under the ground? Aboriginal law and culture should be in the public buildings. For those who cannot go to see the designs and words in the public buildings, they are in the book.

John's first marriage ended in 1987 and he married Professor Betty Watts in 1990 who had a distinguished career in Aboriginal education. Sadly Betty passed away in 1997.

Another of John's passions was golf and he played a pivotal role in establishing the Coast Golf and Recreation Club at Prince Henry Hospital and securing the stunningly beautiful coastline at Little Bay from ever-encroaching development. His name can be found on the clubhouse wall as founding member and second president. In 1989 he received an Order of Australia for his services to psychiatry and Aboriginal health. Although retired he remained a visiting consultant at the School of Community Medicine and an Emeritus Professor of Psychiatry at NSW University.

John was above all a storyteller. He loved to listen to the stories of the people he treated and the people who taught him. He continued to write and publish for a decade after his retirement and his writing, still fresh and often lyrical, reflects his continued wonder at the miracle of human expression in all its manifestations. John is survived by his children Henry, Tom, Katy, Bill and Alice and five grandchildren Fred, Flora, Frankie, Ned and Henry.

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