

Have I really been away that long?

ROBERT COLLINS WENT TO HONG KONG ON A 30-MONTH CONTRACT. ALMOST 30 YEARS LATER, HE IS STILL GAINING FULFILMENT WORKING AS A PATHOLOGIST THERE.

Hong Kong has long been an attractive holiday destination for Australians; it is near enough to almost be a neighbour, though it is sufficiently distant to be called exotic.

A brief visit in 1975 included an ascent of the Peak on the celebrated Peak Tram, with views from Hong Kong Island across the spectacular harbour and on to bustling Tsim Sha Tsui and Kowloon.

In stark contrast, the view from behind the famed Peak lookout, towards the south, revealed a bucolic landscape surrounding Pokfulam Reservoir, with the sleepy fishing town of Aberdeen to one side and the almost uninhabited Lamma Island in the distance.

By the late 1970s, Hong Kong's urban frenzy, vastly different from my youth spent in New England, seemed most appealing

for a short contract of 30 months to combine my advanced training for the RCPA Fellowship with a foreign locality.

The idea had first been suggested by Drs Patricia Bannatyne and Betty Lin, both working in Sydney at the time after having spent several years at Hong Kong's Queen Mary and Queen Elizabeth hospitals respectively.

Patricia had indicated Queen Mary was in the area known as Pokfulam, remembered for its calm from the earlier visit. Pokfulam has now been home for most of my professional life and is still a relatively quiet haven though just minutes from one of the most densely populated places on earth.

Leaving Australia not long after completing my RCPA Part I exams in anatomical pathology meant there were still a number of years of supervised training required in an approved post.

The University of Hong Kong Department of Pathology at the Queen Mary Hospital was an approved training institution and Professor James Gibson, head of the department, was a highly regarded supervisor. An application was followed by an appointment as clinical pathologist, with my family arriving in the then Crown colony just prior to Christmas 1979.

The post of clinical pathologist came with duties in service, teaching and research. Given an apparent surfeit of staff and the highly motivated cream of the scholastic system choosing to study medicine, it was a joy teaching Hong Kong's future doctors, with their enthusiastic participation in lectures,



Dr Robert Collins with his colleague Dr Carolyn Choy who worked in Hong Kong for several years before returning to Sydney in mid-2004

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Dr Collins at the 9th AGM in 2000 with DR CH Leong, President of the Hong Kong Academy of Medicine

tutorials, demonstrations and practical sessions as well as autopsy demonstrations.

Research expectations were comfortably achieved and the service work was an interesting mix of the mundane and stimulating, allowing a satisfying sense of a day's work well done.

In the early days of my career in Hong Kong, it was usual for a junior entering the pathology profession to endure the traditional rite of passage with a brief attachment to one of the renowned institutions in the United Kingdom. Then came the stress of awaiting allocation to an examination centre, hopefully not one with an infamous reputation. The RCPA examinations were regarded as a much more evenhanded, if equally onerous, experience and I passed through the Part II examinations in 1982.

During the 1980s many aspects of medicine in Hong Kong required an overhaul in consideration of the change of sovereignty looming in 1997. Various positive results were achieved, including the inauguration of the Hong Kong College of Pathologists in 1991 and the formation of the Hong Kong Academy of Medicine in 1993, both of which I am proud to be a founding member.

Having been a Hong Kong College of Pathologists council member since its inception, I have held various positions,

culminating in two terms as the fourth president of the College, from 1999-2003.

The budding College learnt and borrowed much from the RCPA and the Royal College of Pathology. As the chief examiner in anatomical pathology until 2001, the great importance of this relationship with the two sister colleges and especially the RCPA was most apparent.

The now firmly established and internationally recognised training and examination program of the HK College of Pathologists is influential in establishing a national training and examination structure in mainland China. Indicative of progress, the Chinese Health Ministry and the HK Academy of Medicine signed a memorandum of understanding in early February 2006.

While president of the College, one of my most satisfying endeavours was involvement in the initiation and launch by the Hong Kong Accreditation Service of Medical Laboratory Accreditation in Hong Kong. This program has a close link with the Hong Kong College of Pathologists. Involvement in this area meshes with my active interest and commitment to accreditation and quality issues for pathology in all its forms.

In addition to my role as a consultant in charge of the division of anatomical pathology in the Department of Pathology

and Clinical Biochemistry, Queen Mary Hospital, I have been chief of service of the department since 1999.

While all chiefs of service at Queen Mary had a worrying time in 2003 with the onset of the previously unencountered and initially mysterious SARS, the chief of service of microbiology and virology undoubtedly had a far more stressful time.

Today, worries about the possible onslaught of avian flu are worldwide, though with the illness having been initially identified in 1997 in Hong Kong, combined with our experience of SARS, concern is possibly higher here.

A combination of living on the quiet side of Hong Kong Island, working in an environment surrounded by country park but with the excitement of a frenetic city just minutes away, the extraordinary enthusiasm of workmates who are willing to focus and achieve, and the satisfaction of being able to make meaningful contributions and promote links between this vibrant city and Australia through the College has turned months into years of fulfilment in Hong Kong. 🔥

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