Guiding lights: Illuminating the lives and legacies of great general practitioners

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THIS VIEWPOINT proposes a recurring column for the *Australian Journal of General Practice (AJGP)*, 'Guiding lights: Illuminating the lives and legacies of great general practitioners', to honour and document the contributions of Australia's most influential general practitioners (GPs). Drawing inspiration from *The Lancet's* 'Profiles' and *The American Journal of Cardiology's* 'Conversations with the Editor', the article argues that general practice as a specialty, merits its own narrative tradition to preserve professional heritage, strengthen identity, and inspire registrars and students. Framed around the recent passing of Emeritus Professor John Murtagh AO, whose scholarship and mentorship shaped generations of doctors, the proposal calls for a living archive within the *AJGP* that celebrates the individuals whose work continues to light the path of Australian general practice.

A moment for remembrance

The passing of Emeritus Professor John Murtagh AO in October 2025 marked the end of an era in Australian general practice. Over several decades, his work as a rural clinician, educator and author helped shape the identity of the profession. Widely regarded as an accomplished proceduralist and gifted teacher, he was also known for his modesty, never considering himself 'special'. Yet his landmark textbook, *John Murtagh's General Practice*,[1] along with his many other publications, has guided generations of medical students and registrars around the world.

As tributes flowed, one question emerged: how well do we, as a profession, preserve our own story? Medicine's history is often told through discoveries, yet general practice, grounded in relationships and community, rarely records the lives that shaped it. We risk others telling an incomplete story, which would miss nuance, skill and the deep experiential care that continuity of relationship brings.[2]

This viewpoint proposes that the *AJGP* introduce a standing column to recognise the great GPs of our time and those before us.

Learning from other journals

Leading journals have long chronicled the personal journeys behind their disciplines. *The Lancet's* 'Profiles' series blends science, motivation and moral compass,[3] whereas *The American Journal of Cardiology's* 'Conversations with the Editor' and Clinical and Translational Science have featured reflections from figures such as Eugene Braunwald and Michael DeBakey.[4,5] These narratives show that medical progress is driven not just by data, but by human perseverance, curiosity and mentorship; becoming historical records that inspire future generations. General practice deserves a similar tradition.

In *Circulation Research*, Roberto Bolli's 2013 editorial launching 'New Leaders in Cardiovascular Science' likewise aimed to humanise discovery by profiling emerging scientists, their motivations, setbacks and defining moments. Such portraits, he argued, help young investigators see how breakthroughs happen and what values sustain excellence.[6]

A proposal for *AJGP* with educational and cultural value

We propose a recurring *AJGP* column titled 'Guiding lights', a 1000-word print piece with an extended online version, celebrating the lives of outstanding GPs. Each profile would balance biography and reflection, capturing career journeys, lessons learned and contributions to patient care, education and community health. Over time, 'Guiding lights' would form a living archive of narratives honouring service and wisdom across generations.

Such a column would advance *AJGP's* mission to strengthen general practice through scholarship and reflection. Educationally, it would enrich professional identity among students and registrars by showing how values like continuity, curiosity and compassion are lived in practice. Culturally, it would foster belonging within the profession, and professionally, it would sustain morale by reminding GPs their work continues a long tradition of service and excellence.

The power of role modelling in shaping professional identity

Role modelling lies at the heart of how doctors become doctors. As the recent scoping review by Koh et al on role modelling and professional identity formation highlights, the process is neither incidental nor uniform; it depends on the delicate interplay between personal values, relationships and the clinical environment. Effective role models do more than demonstrate clinical competence; they embody the attitudes, empathy and ethical compass that learners internalise

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over time. Within this dynamic, moments of 'dissonance' between a learner's expectations and a mentor's behaviour can themselves be formative, prompting reflection and growth. In general practice, where continuity and context define care, the influence of role models extends beyond skill acquisition to shaping a sense of vocation and moral purpose.[7] Celebrating those who have lived these values, our guiding lights, offers both a mirror and a map for the next generation. Without a solid professional identity, sustainability of the workforce is threatened.[8]

Implementation

Partnerships with The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP) Heritage and Archives Committee, RACGP Foundation and GP training networks could support nomination, verification and editorial processes. Contributions could be authored by colleagues, mentees or family members, with *AJGP* providing editorial review to maintain tone, accuracy and peer-review rigour.

Profiles could be published quarterly in print, with extended oral histories hosted online. Over time, this archive could inform College events, exhibitions and educational modules, and its content could be further developed into books, YouTube videos or other creative formats.

Why now?

Emeritus Professor Murtagh's passing is both a loss and a reminder; the loss of a towering teacher and the reminder of how fragile our collective memory is. His life embodied general practice, service, humility and curiosity, and deserves to be preserved in our literature. If general practice is the art of continuity, then continuity requires remembrance. Through 'Guiding lights', *AJGP* can help keep the profession's future connected to its past.

Conclusion

Every consultation continues an unbroken chain of care. The 'Guiding lights' column would honour that heritage through the human stories that shaped our specialty. As we farewell Emeritus Professor John Murtagh AO, let us commit to preserving the wisdom of those who built our craft, ensuring *AJGP* remains both a journal of evidence and a custodian of general practice memory.

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