

A Father of The Fluoride Generation

<http://www.smh.com.au>, July 27, 2006

Noel Martin, 1923-2006



All-rounder ... Noel Martin was a sportsman, dentist and health pioneer.

PEOPLE of a certain age - and they need not be very old - remember the days when half the world's teeth were false. It was not unusual for young Australians to have all their teeth extracted, sometimes as a birthday present, and replaced with dentures. People of about 50 are the first generation to have attended university and to have kept their teeth.

The campaign in the last half of last century to save the nation's teeth was one of the great campaigns. And Noel Martin, whose funeral service was being held in Sydney today, played a leading role in it.

Noel Desmond Martin, who was 82 when he died, was born into a farming family at Lisarow, near Gosford, and matriculated from St Joseph's College in 1940 with a scholarship.

He was a fine schoolboy athlete, excelling at the high jump for which he was to win a blue at Sydney University. He was tall and so thin that his schoolboy nickname was "Friday" because, in those days, Catholics did not eat meat on Fridays.

He graduated from university with honours in dentistry in 1944, was appointed lecturer next year and professor in 1961. He was a member of the dental faculty's teaching staff for 45 years and elected dean for 19 consecutive years until his retirement in 1988.

Fluoride was first added to a water supply in the United States in 1945, by which time Martin was studying the evidence for and against its use. His master's degree was on the effects of fluoride on teeth.

His first of many scientific articles in the *Medical Journal of Australia*, "Dental Caries: Public Health Aspects of Control by Fluorine", appeared in 1947. Martin began a campaign for fluoridation that won over the dental profession, even though its success was to cost them patients. He was a very effective public advocate.

Fluoride was first added to Australian water at Beaconsfield, the Tasmanian mining town, in 1953. In NSW, Martin joined forces with Syd Dobbin, a Yass dentist, and Billy Sheahan, the then NSW minister for health, to bring fluoride to Yass in 1956, 50 years ago last month.

Opponents of fluoridation were many - and aggressive. Some thought fluoride part of a communist plot; others that it was against nature and God's will; others wanted their water straight. Still others believed that any benefits would be outweighed by unfortunate side effects.

Despite Sheahan's support, the NSW Labor government left the decision to local authorities. A number of towns followed Yass but the then Sydney Water Board voted against fluoride in 1963. Martin campaigned around the state and through the media. He paraded the state's first fluoride generation of children, from Yass, with their white, healthy teeth. And, on April 8, 1968, fluoride trickled into Prospect reservoir to enter Sydney's drinking water.

Apart from fluoride, the professor of preventive dentistry was highly influential in promoting a revolution in Australian dental practice, which now features the principles, practices and benefits of preventive dentistry. He pursued his philosophy of preventive health not just in dentistry but also in medicine.

Martin lectured internationally and was a consultant to, or member of, such bodies as the World Health Organisation, the International College of Dentists, the International Association for Dental Research, and dentists' societies in Britain and the United States.

He was a fellow of the Royal Australasian College of Dental Surgeons, leader of the Sydney Dental Hospital, president of the Community Health and Anti-Tuberculosis Association and set up dental clinics at the Redfern Aboriginal Health Centre. He sat on the Sydney University senate and became governor of Sydney University Sport, during a renaissance in the university's sporting achievements, through the awarding of scholarships and enhanced facilities. The university's sports centre was renamed the Noel Martin Recreation Centre. He was a Member of the Order of Australia.

Martin met Bernice Downey, an arts student, at university and they married in 1945. They had 10 children, all of whom have tertiary education. It has been said that they played Scrabble in Latin. Clare Martin, the Chief Minister of the Northern Territory, is one daughter.

Parents are often asked, why so many? Martin, who could be very witty, replied at least once that, it could be said: "It's because of all this fluoride they're putting in the water."

He said of university types: "An academic should have a beard to make him look mature, glasses to make him look studious, and haemorrhoids to make him look concerned." And: "He uses argument much like a drunk uses a lamp post, more for support than for illumination." And: "He's so corrosive, we have to keep him in a wax bottle."

This busy man still found time to be a carpenter, lay bricks and flagging, tile walls and floors, rewire power and light circuits, correct plumbing and drainage, and improve the garden. He was sometimes found in the dental hospital's boiler room, tinkering with pressure gauges or adjusting the lighting over the technicians' work benches. He was even seen replacing hinges on cupboards in the canteen.

He leaves Bernice, the 10 children, grandchildren, a great grandchild, and Elizabeth Butcher, general manager of NIDA, who had lived with him since 1992.

Tony Stephens