

Jeremiah Alfred Chunn

15 February 1923 – 14 April 2012

The wild West Coast of the South Island should have shaped Jeremiah Alfred Chunn, born in Greymouth in 1923, into a bruff and brawny Kiwi codger. What his five children remember instead is an articulate, thoughtful and gently witty father who inspired them through his actions rather than direct instruction. I am his youngest son.



Life on the Coast was Spartan, but Jerry's father, a bookmaker whose office consisted of public bars, recognised his son's potential and sent him to St Bede's College in Christchurch. Many years later Jerry's family of five, mothered by nurse Yvonne Williams, whom he married in 1951, heard many times of his achievements in the St Bede's First XV rugby and First XI cricket teams.

It wasn't until I went there with Dad and his brother Jack in 2002 that I realised the probability of making both teams in the early 1940s was made better by the student intake level at the time.

Dad studied hard, and medical school in 1943 came next, followed by the rigours of internships at hospitals in England and Scotland which were inadequately heated, we were told much later. Jerry returned to New Zealand in the mid-1950s to set up practice in Otahuhu, South Auckland, and in 1968 set out in his course to pursue asthma and allergies. Trips followed to the United States in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when Dad visited specialists using provocative neutralising treatment, new at the time.

Dr Chunn set up a practice in central Auckland offering treatment for allergies and during her eulogy at Jerry's funeral in April, his daughter Louise pointed out that during a school holiday when she helped out on reception at his surgery in Dilworth Building on Queen Street, "we were quite untroubled by patients". In fact, some of Jerry's peers in his early years of applying the provocative neutralising method referred to him, playfully or not, as "a quack".

But the practice grew, and the family refrigerator at 469 Parnell Road in the mid-1970s was host to distillations of allergens in little bottles which would be taken to his new surgery at 473 Parnell Road and tested on an ever-growing number of patients. To a child who would sometimes venture next door for a look at what his dad did, it appeared a very simple procedure. All you needed to do was make a neat line of pricks up a patient's arms with an assortment of hypodermic needles. The result would be either nothing special at all, or vivid red blotches which indicated Dad was getting nearer to a diagnosis.

Back at home he kept strict patient privilege, only going so far as to sometimes mention the emotional strength families of hyperactive children must require to live with an affliction which was so misunderstood and destructive and yet almost lampooned by those who had no idea. The families came from all levels of society, and as far as I know Dad didn't show great alacrity in pursuing bad debtors. Over the decades I have met many strangers who, when they recognise the surname, say: "Your father helped my family so much."

Dad admired many authors, from Shakespeare to Tom Wolfe, but P.G. Wodehouse was a constant paperback companion throughout his life, as the music of Bing Crosby or Frank Sinatra drifted softly from an adjacent room. None of his children entered the sciences, but Jerry followed their paths as they ventured off into the music business, opened restaurants and worked in journalism or labouring.

His eldest son, Mike, was a founding member of Split Enz, and no other Auckland doctor attended so many concerts by the band in the 1970s. Citizen Band, or CB (for Chunn Brothers), came next, fronted by eldest sons Geoff and Mike. Dad even showed up to a blaring gig by one of my bands in the 1990s in Sydney. He kept an open mind, and he was never judgemental.

The little church in Parnell was packed for Jerry's funeral, with some people standing at the back or filling up the choir loft. At the end of the service, when Dad's casket was rolled out, everybody clapped.

Jeremy Chunn, a son who is a journalist in Sydney, wrote this obituary.