

Peter Ravenscroft
on life-changing times
in his career

MY EUREKA MOMENTS



key points

As the outgoing Chairman of the International Christian Medical and Dental Association, the author gave the opening address at the 2010 World Congress in Uruguay: *Balancing priorities: integrating faith and science*. He concentrated on personal Eureka! moments.

On a student elective in Papua New Guinea, a pioneering missionary surgeon had great faith as well as skill and was a lifelong encouragement. A visit to Switzerland confirmed that Francis Schaeffer was a man who lived a life that matched his inspirational rhetoric.

Crying in the shower gave relief as his first wife was dying, and an interest in palliative care culminated in a Chair. As Christians, we need both technical expertise in science to practise our chosen profession, and the meaning and purpose for life which comes through faith.

I would like to take the first step in this Congress¹ of helping us to get to know each other better, and to tell you some of the 'eureka moments' of my own story, which illustrate the interaction and priorities of faith and medicine.

I like to talk of these experiences as 'eureka moments' for this reason. You will remember that Archimedes, while bathing, discovered that any object floating upon, or submerged in, a fluid is buoyed upward by a force equal to the weight of the displaced fluid. He realised that principle would allow him to measure the disputed composition of a crown and is then said to have taken to the streets, so excited by his discovery that he had forgotten to get dressed. He shouted *Eureka!* (meaning 'I have found it!') as he went. There are moments in life when we realise we have found something very meaningful, and they often come after hard and testing times. For me, these moments have been ones of personal discovery, and some of intense emotion.

Encouraged by Theo in Papua New Guinea

For my elective as a medical student, I applied to the Papua New Guinea (PNG) government to work as a medical assistant. The Health Department assigned me to Yagaum Lutheran Mission Hospital, just inland from Madang, a town on the north coast of PNG. My job was to assist Dr Theo Braun, a missionary surgeon, who had arrived in PNG at the age of 26. Mornings were spent in surgery; in

the afternoons my job was to manage the medical wards. Theo said he didn't know much medicine, so he was leaving it to me! That was real faith!

My three months with Theo were a formative experience. Theo was a surgeon, a great technical surgeon as far as I could see. He was also a man of faith and vision. At the end of World War II, he asked General McArthur if he could have the equipment from the American field hospital at Finschhafen, further down the north coast of Papua New Guinea. Upon getting a positive answer, he arranged to raft the hospital contents up to Yagaum. In 1950, he set up a surgical facility in a series of huts in the jungle that had been used as barracks for Japanese soldiers, at whose hands he had suffered much. Theo had the ability, facilities and equipment to do most types of surgery. I have never seen his like since.

In Theo, I saw a man who had thoroughly integrated his faith and his practice of medicine. I worshipped with him in the little mission church and helped with surgery. I am truly grateful to him for this time we spent together. As I left the mission hospital, he said to me, 'Peter, I have no doubt you will become a great physician'. Whether I deserved these comments or not, I have looked back to them many times since, when things have been very difficult, and I have been encouraged to keep going. That memory has been helpful too in reminding me to encourage younger people in their own journeys. My *eureka* moment came as I reflected on the example Theo had set for me.

Inspired by Francis Schaeffer

In the mid-1970s, I was in the United States doing postdoctoral research at the University of California, San Francisco. Heather, my first wife, and I began to notice there were a number of books by Francis and Edith Schaeffer circulating at our church. As we read them and got hold of Schaeffer's tapes, we became quite excited with their contents. Francis Schaeffer was an important Protestant theological figure in post-war times. He addressed, among other things, the loss of hope and reason in post-war society.

Francis Schaeffer² encouraged us all to take our faith and explore it consistently in all areas of human endeavour – in medicine, science, the arts, family relationships. It was that integration of all these factors that captured my attention. His work impressed us so much that at the end of my Fellowship, Heather and I flew to Switzerland from the USA to see if this fellow 'was real', that is, whether he could live a life that matched his rhetoric. He was able to demonstrate that and more, and that experience formed a *eureka* moment that I have found to be true as I have lived on in life.

Dealing with my wife's death

Heather developed breast cancer at age 35 and died in April 1986 aged 39. She had surgery, chemotherapy, radiotherapy and palliative care and was managed at home except for acute hospital admissions. It was a very hard time for our children, the whole family and me. One morning, I was having a shower and found myself crying. I have found in my experience in palliative care that it is not uncommon for men to cry in the shower. It is the one place where we men can be alone with our thoughts, experience deep emotion, and express it in privacy.

At that time I was grappling with the sorrow of why God was not healing Heather. If anyone deserved healing, I thought, Heather did. There was much love and prayer for her from all of us. My *eureka* moment came when I realised that I must continue to pray for Heather's healing, yet at the same time understand that she may not be healed – that was my paradox. Understanding this situation was beyond me, but it seemed I needed to acknowledge my own humanity before God. I fell into line with Job, who having been through all his suffering was able to say:

*I know that you [God] can do all things;
No plan of yours can be thwarted³*

To understand that I had to live with that tension was actually very liberating for me, both during Heather's terminal illness and after her death. We continued to pray and to care for Heather at home until the time she died. Why some die young and why others live longer is a mystery to me. I know I will only understand when I too have gone to be with Christ – and what a *eureka* moment that will be!

Led to a Chair in palliative care

While at Princess Alexandra Hospital, we decided to apply for a major grant to consolidate the research programme and the clinical work at the hospital and hospice. It was our dream, but the grant was not funded. After a struggle and much prayer, I realised I should be prepared to move, if necessary.

I began looking around Australia. While doing this, I received a phone call from a friend who was working at a palliative care service in Newcastle (about 800 km to the south). He was a Christian, but had developed leukaemia. He had helped raise funds to build a new hospice, his dream, but he needed to go back to Western Australia to be near his family during treatment. Was this the opportunity that was being given to me?

I subsequently applied for and accepted in 1992 the position of Hospice Director and Foundation Professor of Palliative Care in Newcastle. Within a year, my friend and research colleague and the head of my research laboratory both moved from Brisbane to Newcastle to work with me. We developed palliative care services in Newcastle and re-established the research programme, fulfilling our Brisbane dream. I felt God led us, my second wife Beth and I, to Newcastle and into palliative care there.

My *eureka* moment came when I realised this was where God wanted me to be and I was amazed that the staff and facilities available would make our dream possible. I always say to my trainees that they should keep their minds open to a calling. Even if it means a change in direction and location, God may lead you into a wonderful work. I am for ever grateful for that opportunity in my life.

Faith is our *raison d'être*

Faith gives our lives and our medicine and dentistry meaning and purpose. It is our *raison d'être*. It is in the context of faith that we, as Christians, practise our medicine and dentistry. As Christians, we need both technical expertise in science to practise our chosen profession, and the meaning and purpose for life which comes through faith. For all of us life will bring challenges, but for me, the *eureka* moments have helped to fashion my life of faith and therefore my practice of medicine.

Paul gives us this advice that is still as relevant for us each day as we practise medical science as it was for the first century church:

See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.⁴

Peter Ravenscroft is Professor of Palliative Medicine, University of Newcastle, Australia and was Chairman of ICMDA from 2002-2010



Francis Schaeffer

I have found in my experience in palliative care that it is not uncommon for men to cry in the shower

references

1. Extract from the Opening Address, given at the XIV World Congress of ICMDA, Uruguay, 2010: *Balancing priorities: integrating faith and science*
2. Schaeffer F. *Complete Works of Francis A Schaeffer. A Christian World View*. Crossways 1982; Vol 1: p 9,10
3. Job 42:1
4. Colossians 2:8