MEDIA RELEASE

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Toowoomba Hospital bids farewell to well-liked, skilled plaster technician

IN MANY ways Toowoomba Hospital’s veteran plaster technician Keith Smith’s career has been a reflection of broader society.

For more than 40 years, Mr Smith has worked at the hospital to help fix broken bones and patch up patients, in more ways than one.

He has been privy to a multitude of changes not only in the way health care is provided, but also the way society treats its sick and injured.

Keith started at the Toowoomba Hospital in the early 1970s as a teenager in the hospital’s mortuary. He was in charge of preparing bodies for autopsies and he worked closely with local police officers.

It was an era of fast cars, no seatbelts and drink driving was practically acceptable. On top of that, work place health and safety guidelines were loose, and horrific industrial and agricultural accidents were common.

For 18-year-old Keith, the hazards of the time were unfortunately reflected in a multitude traumatic injuries and tragic deaths, often involving young people.

“I was thrown in the deep end and it was very steep learning curve,” Mr Smith said.

“There was only one social worker who worked full time at the hospital, and quite often the police would ask us to step outside to talk to and console the families.”

However, work at the hospital wasn’t all grim. Mr Smith found small graces in providing comfort to those grieving families, and the surprising, yet, heartening arrival of romance.

“My father was a wardsman at the time, and he told me about a nurse who he thought I should meet. Her name was Annette Reed,” Mr Smith said.

“My father arranged a blind date. We courted at the hospital, and about a year later Annette and I were married.”

On the professional scene, after a number of years in the mortuary, Mr Smith’s career progressed into orthopaedics.

“The hospital was getting bigger and busier, and was taking in more doctors,” he said.

Under the tutelage of former orthopaedic surgeons Dr Frank Hepple and Dr Bruce Geaney, Mr Smith was soon setting plasters and helping to fix broken bones.
It was the days of heavy “Plaster of Paris”, head-to-toe casts and traction beds.

Cumbersome “hip spicas” were used to set broken hips or thighs in place, and the commonly referred to “aeroplane” splints immobilised bad shoulder injuries.

“I still remember one of the first adult hip spicas I put on a lady,” Mr Smith said.

“She was saying that the cast weighed a tonne, and she was comparing it to a suit of armour.

“Looking back, it probably was fairly weighty. I wanted to do a good job so a fair few layers went into that cast.

“Completely out of the blue, I saw that lady at the hospital about four years ago, and she remembered me. It must have been a memorable experience because it was 25 or 30 years after I gave her that cast.”

In 1985, Mr Smith was joined by his brother Clive in the orthopaedics department. To this day they are known as the ‘Smith Brothers’ and they have collectively amassed over 80 years of experience in plastering.

“In Queensland, I think you would be hard pressed to find anyone with more experience than us,” Mr Smith said.

On 16 October, Mr Smith will officially hang up his plastering tools and bid farewell to the hospital.

“I have enjoyed my many years. The people have been wonderful and I will miss the contact with the patients,” he said.

“I feel fortunate to have worked for Queensland Health for all of these years, and for the future it has given me and my wife in retirement.”

Toowoomba Hospital General Manager Dr Peter Gillies said Mr Smith’s expertise was “unrivalled” and his caring approach to his work would be greatly missed.

“There are situations where Keith is required to apply complex plaster casts that others lack the skills to undertake,” Dr Gillies said.

“Keith, and his brother Clive are well known, and well liked, right across the hospital.

“He not only works in the orthopaedic outpatient clinic, he is also called upon to help with orthopaedic cases in the operating theatre, the critical care ward and paediatrics.

“His skills are highly valued, and during his career Keith has been very generous with his time and ensured the next generation of plaster technicians have been trained to take over after his departure.”

In retirement, Mr Smith hopes to travel regularly to the Philippines with his wife, Annette, to continue their charitable work they began 12 years ago.

The couple supports women who are struggling to provide education and adequate housing for their children, with the aim of finding them long-term employment.
“It is most rewarding to see these ladies grow and do well in life,” he said.

Their generosity has seen women become university educated nurses, company directors and teachers.

“Supporting others is something I would encourage everyone to do,” he said. “To look back and to see where these ladies have come from and what their future holds is humbling.”

Mr Smith said his work at the hospital, alongside his personal experiences in the Philippines, has highlighted the many fortunes of living in modern Australia.

“The health care now is so much better than when I started. There’ve been improvements across not only the care provided, but also medicines, techniques and outcomes for patients,” Mr Smith said.

“I would encourage anyone who doubts me to go to the Philippines and see what life is like there.”

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