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Obituary – The Late Emeritus Professor Hal Kendig

The following obituary was originally published in the Sydney Morning Herald and Brisbane Times on 4th September 2018.

With the death of Hal Kendig, Australia has lost a widely acknowledged giant in the field of gerontology – the highly multidisciplinary domain of ageing research and policy.

Gerontology is the study of ageing and older people and its intersection with and impact upon diverse fields from geography to economics, sociology, health, technology, culture, and urban design. It has expanded significantly in recent years with the recognition of population ageing as a global issue.

A true gerontologist, Kendig will be remembered for his big-picture thinking. He consistently rejected the narrow "doomsday problem" framing of population ageing, popularly spruiked by politicians, economists and the media, where there are ever fewer resources to allocate over an increasingly dependent population.

Rather, he saw older people as part of the solution. For Kendig, the social and demographic fact of population ageing – the incredible achievement of increased longevity – should be viewed as a triumph for humanity.

This natural population transition, occurring progressively over time and over the individual life course, can be managed sensibly and constructively, he argued. Especially for a rich country such as Australia. But different, more integrated approaches to policymaking are required that don't neatly fit traditional political portfolios.

Kendig prosecuted this argument throughout his career, to successive governments, before multiple enquiries and at every media opportunity. A

prolific writer and active participant in public forums, Kendig's contribution to research over more than four decades and his powerful influence in shaping the national discussion and policy framework on ageing is widely documented and deeply respected.

As an academic, he stood out because he understood the critical role of research in developing strong public policy and the crucial role of political advocacy in making it happen.

Minister for Mental Health and Ageing during the Gillard Government, Mark Butler, whose 2015 book, *Advanced Australia – The Politics of Ageing*, builds much upon the work of Kendig and his colleagues, says Kendig's capacity to straddle academia, policymaking and politics was no mean feat.

"Hal was able to talk calmly and persuasively about the macro elements of one of the most profound shifts in society – population ageing. His consistent advocacy was that it was something that should be celebrated; that it is a dynamic that crosses all policy areas – housing, health, finance, urban planning, aged care; that if you are serious about it then you need to work on it across silos and in an interdisciplinary way, had a significant impact, certainly on our government's thinking and action in the area," he said.

"But one of the things that really marked him out was his ability to talk about the human element. He was always positive about ageing as one of the greatest triumphs of human endeavour, rather than an economic and social catastrophe that would usher in a new gerontocracy. He was always an encouraging figure. He would continue to push but his constant smile is what I really remember – even when talking about really tough stuff."

Named after his father, Hal was born Harold Leroy Kendig (jnr), in Glendale, California, in May 1948, the eldest of three sons. He liked to refer to himself as coming from "the wrong side of the tracks" – a slightly glamorised view of modest beginnings. When he left home to attend the University of California at San Diego, he was the first in his nuclear family to do so.

While studying there, he married Wendy Willcox – who he'd known since high school – and together they moved to the University of California at Davis, near Sacramento in northern California, where Hal completed his BA degree in sociology. His Masters and PhD degrees were completed in Los Angeles at the University of Southern California.

Hal was only 27, with two young children and a freshly minted PhD when he arrived in Australia to take up a research fellow role in urban research at the Australian National University (ANU). His commitment was consolidated in 1980 when he became director of the landmark ANU *Ageing and the Family Project*.

It was a new multidisciplinary research initiative of ANU's Research School of Social Sciences on "applied topics of national importance and of relevance to policy". With a staff that included over its five years, sociologists, demographers, psychologists, an anthropologist, an economist, and a political scientist; and the involvement of social workers, an urban planner, a geriatrician, a nurse and a lawyer, it marked a turning point in Australia's thinking about population ageing and set the field of Australian gerontology on a new path.

Australia felt right for Kendig and his family. He thrived under the influence of several brilliant mentors, including the eminent Dr Sidney Sax, a leading contributor to health and medical policy under Whitlam, Fraser and Hawke who is credited with building the foundations for our modern Medicare. Kendig felt privileged to have ridden on Sax's shoulders at the time.

Kendig's career took him and his family to La Trobe University in Melbourne – as director of the Lincoln Gerontology Centre for Teaching and Research – and personal chair and adjunct professor in the School of Public Health.

From 1998 to 2012, he was variously dean and professor in the Faculty of Health Sciences at the University of Sydney before returning to ANU.

Among his many honours and awards, Kendig was a Fellow of the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia (ASSA) and a distinguished member, and later a life member of the Australian Association of Gerontology. In 2003 he received the Prime Minister's Centenary Medal for "outstanding service to aged care and healthy ageing through social science". In 2008, he was invited to participate in the then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's "2020 Summit".

But it was his personal style and influence as a dedicated mentor and generous collaborator that will be one of Kendig's most enduring legacies. His generosity with time and his reputation for encouragement, fairness and kindness, especially toward emerging researchers, is universally acknowledged.

Always philosophical, in his later years, Kendig acknowledged the influence of the writings of Roman emperor, Marcus Aurelius, who had a daily practice of reflection designed to make him humble, patient, empathetic, generous and strong in the face of whatever he was dealing with.

Age Discrimination Commissioner, Dr Kay Patterson, remembers a lunch enjoyed with Kendig before his illness became too debilitating. Their careers had intersected at various stages over more than three decades – initially teaching at La Trobe University; then later on health and ageing policy during Patterson's tenure as minister for health and ageing in the Howard government; and finally in her current role.

She said she was humbled by his calm acceptance and composure when he spoke of his medical condition and the certain knowledge of a shortened life. "I have enormous respect for Hal's intellect and achievements as an academic and policy advocate, but the strength and equanimity he demonstrated in the face of death was truly humbling," she said.

Growing up in Southern California, his pastimes invariably involved the ocean and the outdoors. He loved swimming, boating and fishing and took great pride in his garden. His last foray away from Canberra was a family trip to his beloved south coast for the opportunity to throw in a line.

Hal is survived by his wife Wendy and their three children, Kathy Featherstone, Caralee McLiesh and Michael Kendig, their respective spouses and five grandchildren.

Keryn Curtis

Hal Kendig May 22, 1948 - June 4, 2018