

Setting a small bird free

Glenn Colquhoun's oration moved many doctors to tears at this year's RNZCGP conference. *Jodi Yeats profiles an extraordinary GP and poet*

Glenn Colquhoun squirms in a large velvet seat when I interview him in the business lounge of Wellington's Duxton Hotel, only leaning on the table when he becomes engaged in telling a story.

He is not in his element, that's clear. For starters, Glenn's mates have already given him stick about his flash charcoal suit on the drive down from Paraparaumu in his beat-up Mazda Familia. "It's my suit for burying people in," Glenn explains.

The boy is evident in the man, in the body language, the cheeky grin, the slim frame almost swimming in the suit, and the occasional *bro Town* turn of phrase from growing up in south Auckland.

It's funny talking to me, Glenn says, because we met in a seminar year for him, studying creative writing at Auckland University.

That was an important year not for his future writing, but because it was the first group he had belonged to outside the Seventh Day Adventist church. Both parents were Adventist, the family's social life revolved around the church, and Glenn attended Adventist schools. After school, he went to Avondale College in New South Wales to study to be a church minister. Glenn was the big mouth of the class and his cheeky *bro Town* humour wasn't appreciated. At the end of the second year, he was asked to take some time out and reconsider his vocation.

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After a few odd jobs, including baking wheat for Sanitarium's Weet-Bix, and helping his father with building projects, he decided to take an arts degree, including the creative writing paper. Glenn had always loved stories, and had a great imagination, enjoying making things up.

It seems odd now, but I recall him as a quiet and serious student. The fact he was already married added to his apparent gravitas.

But Glenn says his reality was different; he was feeling intimidated and exposed.

"I felt confident in my community but, in that class, I didn't know what the rules were. I didn't know how to be with youse all...I remember feeling quite dysfunctional in terms of relationships with people outside the church and I was intellectually starting to leave the church."

Our conversation is cut short, because it's time for Glenn to go downstairs to the hotel ballroom and deliver the oration.

Now the man is evident in the boy. Up on the podium, Glenn clutches the lectern, slows his sonorous voice down and tells us a story. Perhaps he's drawing on those two years at the seminary, but if this was a sermon, his church would be the most popular one in town.

Speaking about "ache" in general practice, Glenn grabs his audience with a humorous beginning and then hauls us through heart-rending and brave descriptions of his own personal sources of ache, and an explanation of how they help him relate to patients.

What a ride. Just as we are feeling sad and moved, he makes us laugh again. Glenn even sings, nicely, a croony old number called "Blue Side of Lonesome", that is of the same type he likes to listen to at home.

Glenn discovered this music when he lived in the Northland settlement of Te Tii on a year's break between fourth and fifth years of his second degree, medicine. The aunts liked to listen to Frank Sinatra, Tony Bennett and other golden oldies, which are now his favourites too.

Even without the stellar performance, the oration is an eloquent piece of writing. We hear about Glenn watching his builder father being "dismantled plank by plank", over 30 years, by Parkinson's disease. Then there's an extraordinarily poetic portrait of his 10-year marriage with its devastating conclusion: "I made her believe in a life outside her head and when she had come to trust me fully, I failed her spectacularly."

There are reflections on parenthood through tales of life with his six-year-old daughter. Glenn receives a standing ovation.

It's ironic, he says, that writing comes from a place of doubt and incapacity, from being a poor person and a poor doctor, yet

success as a writer qualifies you as a social commentator.

"False modesty" claims his publisher, Roger Steele, who stands out from the suited crowd in the marbled Duxton lobby with his candy pink and white shirt, unruly grey hair and large flax kete.

Glenn has important things to say, for instance using the image of a marriage for the relationship between Maori and Pakeha – a constructive analogy, Roger explains.

Glenn has made wise observations in the media about people not listening to each other and not understanding each other in many areas.

Roger recalls waking unusually early one Saturday morning and taking Glenn's manuscript off a large pile of submissions. He was transfixed by what he found there.

It was Glenn's first collection of poems, subsequently published as *The Art of Walking Upright*, and inspired by his year at Te Tii and the people he met there.

"Maori are some of the best storytellers. They are so in touch with land and sea and have the best sense of humour. They have huge amounts to teach us, and Glenn lapped it all up. What they had to say fell on the fertile soil of his imagination," Roger says.

He was hugely excited by the manuscript and could hardly wait until it was a respectable hour to call Glenn to say he wanted first dibs on publishing it.

Becoming Glenn's publisher has turned out to be an inspired decision, with that book winning Best First Book of Poetry in the 2000 Montana New Zealand Book Awards and further awards and accolades to come for future publications.

Playing God (2002) won the poetry category of the same awards in 2003. It has been a big seller in the UK and is now in "double platinum" worldwide at around 10,000 copies sold.

"He reaches people on lots of different levels and I think his sense of humour gets him in the door," Roger says.

Glenn is also a publisher's dream because he is an inspired performer and storyteller, and he has a good rapport with children on the obligatory authors' school tours.

Glenn has written several children's books, including *Uncle Glenn and Me* (1999) about an uncle who says rude words, burps, plays tricks and pokes his tongue out.

Roger believes Glenn's writing helps him avoid burnout, with writing recharging him for medicine, and medicine inspiring his writing about people.

Glenn works two days a week at Hora Te Pai and a day at a Hutt Valley CYFS care and protection unit. He then looks after his daughter for the rest of the week, as well as scribbling poems. These are the "Father, Son and Holy Ghost" and, as long as all three are in balance, he is happy.

"When he is writing, he misses medicine, and when he's doing medicine he misses writing," Roger explains, adding Glenn has found the common thread of both – telling stories.

It's the balanced view an outsider can offer. Listening to Glenn describe what got him started as a serious writer, you could be forgiven for thinking poetry is his first love.

It was in Glenn's third year at med school, where he was already an older student, that a cardiac surgeon put up a poem on the overhead at the

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end of a lecture. It was intended to remind students there was more to life than medicine, but for Glenn it led to an epiphany reminding him of what he had earlier been interested in doing.

"I was older and thought I'd just have a crack. Before then I had put too much weight on my shoulders, thinking I had to write good poems. Now I thought 'you have to start somewhere and write some bad poems before you can write good ones'. And I was ready to write about ordinary things."

It wasn't long before writing came more easily, and writing about what was "outside my front door" has been a winning formula.

Glenn chose general practice because he could work in a rural area, plus he had done two degrees and so was not too keen on more study.

Poetry works well alongside the demands of general practice because it is compact and portable. It captures a single image rather than telling a complex story, so can be written in shorter sessions. Leaving a poem and picking it up again is an important part of writing poetry.

"Poetry is not all about writing, it's a lot about looking. You don't need a lot of time, but you do need a particular way of looking at things."

When Glenn writes poetry, it feels like setting free a small bird that has been trapped inside the house and is flapping against the window. "You get it to the door and then it doesn't belong to you any more. There's a type of sense of release."

Next year, Glenn hopes to get a creative writing paper under way for doctors and nurses run out of Auckland University's Goodfellow Unit. He'll use his 2010 Fulbright Scholarship to study similar programmes in the US.

When doctors talk about medicine, they talk about the science of it.

"We have excluded the subjective, but it is a very subjective art form."

Glenn hopes the paper will stimulate doctors and nurses to bring the subjective back into medicine.

If the college oration is anything to go by, he's already made a good start. I go out to the gleaming hotel bathroom afterwards and find a young GP sobbing. "Are you alright?" I ask. "What's the matter?"

"That was beautiful, wasn't it," she says.

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