

## Professor Sir Michael Marmot

The degree of Doctor of Medicine (honoris causa) was conferred upon Professor Sir Michael Marmot at the Faculty of Medicine's 150th birthday celebrations held on 13 June 2006.



Chancellor the Hon Justice Kim Santow conferring the honorary degree upon Professor Marmot, *photo, courtesy Faculty of Medicine.*

### Citation

Chancellor, I have the honour to present Professor Sir Michael Marmot for admission to the degree of Doctor of Medicine, *honoris causa*.

Sir Michael Marmot is a social epidemiologist of rare repute - indeed a founding father of that discipline. He has pioneered the academic study of how society influences health, particularly cardiovascular health, and of health inequalities both within and between countries. He chairs The World Health Organization Commission on Social Determinants of Health, which will report this year.

The social and biological factors which Sir Michael has already identified as causes of disease and mortality have been as unexpected as they are preventable. The famous 'Whitehall studies' which he led showed that the higher people progressed in the hierarchy of the British civil service, the better their cardiac health and life expectancy - much better. The studies turned conventional wisdom about 'executive stress' upside down. He argues that limited personal autonomy and poor social participation are killers, acting via endocrine and metabolic pathways.

This has major implications for political and corporate management policies, not to mention 'participation policies' for an aging population. Our leaders would do well to read his book called 'Status Syndrome'.

He is a distinguished graduate of this University. But the Medical Faculty's 1968 Senior Year Book records, curiously, that Michael Marmot was born in 1945 and 'became educated in 1966'. That was the year he undertook his Bachelor of Science (Medical) degree in cardiac Pharmacology. He has since explained the profound significance of this research year, which formed an unconventional interlude in an otherwise highly conventional medical degree program. It took him outside medicine. He read public affairs journals such as 'Encounter'. He met sociologists and political scientists. He began attending English I lectures, and amazingly finished English I while a junior doctor at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital. Atypically for his time, he was exposed to the breadth of ideas and evidence-based questioning which now formally underpin the University's innovative Graduate Medical Program.

Not that all his teachers were impressed by the 'liberating effects of 1966'. One exasperated surgeon reportedly demanded that he 'stop thinking and start memorising'.

After graduating in medicine and undertaking residency at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital Dr Marmot was again to ignore conventional advice, when, two years later, he removed himself from the intensely stratified junior hierarchy which constitutes the training grounds of postgraduate internal medicine. Perhaps this was an

uncannily prescient move, foreshadowing his own later research on 'autonomy'. Nevertheless, his clinical mentors were horrified. Once off the 'ladder' his career was surely doomed.

He decided instead to study epidemiology in the United States. As thoracic patients kept on re-appearing at Prince Alfred he had reasoned that too much medicine and surgery was actually failed prevention. To improve health one needed to treat society. This idea, which took root in Sydney, has underpinned all his later work.

One of his Sydney teachers had just met a renowned Berkeley epidemiologist at a conference. Michael Marmot sensed opportunity. Then a Travelling Fellowship from Sydney University's Postgraduate Medical Foundation enabled him to study epidemiology and public health at Berkeley. Chance favours the prepared mind. And so began a career in epidemiology which now sees him as Director of The International Centre for Health and Society at University College London. He is an Adjunct Professor at the Harvard School of Public Health.

He has chaired or participated in virtually every recent pivotal public enquiry on cardiovascular health conducted by Britain, Europe or the WHO. His work has at different times focused on areas ranging from the Western Pacific and China to the Eastern Mediterranean and Pakistan. He has focused, too, on diet and cancer.

He was knighted in 2000. In the same year he was designated 'Alumnus of the Year' by the University of California, Berkeley.

In 2004 he was awarded the prestigious International Balzan Foundation Prize for his scholarly work in epidemiology.

He has taken the 'road less travelled' - from undergraduate cardiac pharmacology to the social prevention of cardiac disease on a global scale. 'The desire to know is the forefather of thought'.

Chancellor, I present Michael Gideon Marmot for admission to the degree of Doctor of Medicine, honoris causa, and I invite you to confer the degree upon him.