

Professor Robert Porter AC

The honorary degree of Doctor of Science was conferred upon Professor Robert Porter AC, MA DM *Oxon* BMedSc DSc *Adel*, FRACP FAA, Planning Dean (Medicine) at James Cook University and former Dean of the Faculty of Medicine at Monash University, at a conferring of degrees ceremony held in the Great Hall on 27 April 2001.

Citation

Chancellor, I have the honour to present Professor Robert Porter, AC for the conferring of the degree Doctor of Science (*honoris causa*).

Robert Porter is a graduate in Medical Science of the University of Adelaide. After selection as South Australian Rhodes Scholar in 1954, he went to the University of Oxford where he completed a medical degree, obtaining First Class Honours in Physiology. Subsequently, he spent some time in general practice before returning to Oxford in 1960 as a Departmental Demonstrator in Physiology. It was at this time that he began working on the brain's control of muscle movement. This research required the use of highly sophisticated techniques to determine the ways in which the nerve signals are transmitted from the highest level of the brain (the motor cortex) down to the spinal cord.

In 1967, Robert Porter returned to Australia where he was appointed to a chair of Physiology at Monash University. He joined Professor Archie McIntyre, the Foundation Professor of Physiology at that University, and Professor Mollie Holman. Together, they established one of the finest physiology departments in the world. Professor Porter's research during his period at Monash University constitutes a major contribution to our understanding of the control of muscle movement. For example, it is well known that many skilled activities, such as playing the piano, require the precise coordination of the contraction and relaxation of many different muscles. The research conducted by Professor Porter and his colleagues helped to elucidate the mechanisms operating in the brain and spinal cord which are responsible for these complex interactions. This knowledge has been of fundamental importance in developing strategies to rehabilitate patients suffering disease of or injury to the brain.

From 1980 to 1989, Professor Porter was Howard Florey Professor of Medical Research and the Director of the John Curtin School of Medical Research in the Australian National University. As well as directing the School, Professor Porter continued to be active and productive in his neurophysiological research. The two monographs that Professor Porter co-authored on the topic of voluntary movements, published in 1977 and 1993, are considered major works in the field.

His commitment to medical research is matched by his service to medical education and research administration. He has held many senior management positions, including Dean of the Faculty of Medicine and, later, Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research) at Monash University, Chairman of the Committee of Deans of Australian Medical Schools, Chairman of the Medical Research Advisory Committee of the National Health and Medical Research Council, and Chairman of the Science Policy Committee of the Australian Academy of Sciences. For four years, he was Biological Secretary of the Australian Academy of Science, and he has been an adviser on health and medical education to both the Commonwealth and the Victorian State Governments. Most recently, as Planning Dean, he was responsible for the development of a new medical school at James Cook University in North Queensland.

The University of Sydney is indebted to him for the academic progress of the Menzies School of Health Research in Darwin, and advice to the Faculty of Medicine during the period of its development of the Graduate Medical Program. It is a pleasure to note that, in the most recent Australia Day honors list, Professor Porter was made a Companion in the General Division of the Order of Australia. In summary, Robert Porter is a person of great eminence who has rendered exemplary service to medical science and to medical education.

It has been said that his work is his principal hobby. But he is also a walker, a gardener, a photographer and a carpenter. He particularly enjoys making frames for his wife's paintings, and the subjects of his photographs are frequently those that she likes to paint.

Chancellor, I have great pleasure in presenting Professor Robert Porter, AC for admission to the degree of Doctor of Science (honoris causa).