

Professor John Stewart Deeble AO, 9 July 1931 to 5 October 2018

Often dubbed ‘the father of Medicare’, John Deeble co-authored, with Dr Dick Scotton, the original proposals for universal health insurance in Australia in 1968, while working at the Melbourne University Institute of Applied Economic Research. These proposals led to the 1975 establishment of Medibank, and subsequently, Medicare, in 1984. He was a conceiver, implementer and defender of universal healthcare for nearly 50 years.

John left school at the age of 15, working at various jobs while completing a Commerce Degree part-time at Melbourne University, then a Diploma of Hospital Administration from the University of New South Wales. In 1957 John became Assistant Manager at the Peter MacCallum Institute. Because he was in charge of finances at what was, for the time, a very high-tech hospital, he felt the need to return to University to study hospital costs—he had been troubled seeing people refuse cancer treatment because they could not afford it.

In 1965, John obtained a full-time research position at the Institute of Applied Economic Research at the University of Melbourne, where he worked with Dick Scotton, and assembled the first set of Australian health expenditure statistics. The statistical analysis he undertook prompted scepticism about the inequity of the then voluntary system of private health insurance. The system produced uneven access and costs, the burden of which was borne largely by those who could least afford it. John was also worried about its overall cost, and the inefficiency of the many small private health insurers.

Against this background, Deeble and Scotton conceived the idea of a compulsory public national health insurance scheme based on the principles of universal coverage, equity of access and payment according to means through the taxation system. In the mid-1960s, Opposition Leader and future Prime Minister Gough Whitlam was exploring new policy options for Australia, including universal healthcare, and sought expert advice from a group of politicians and researchers including John.

After the Labor Party’s win in the 1972 election came the difficult task for John, as Special Adviser to then Social Security Minister Bill Hayden, of designing the administrative and legislative detail of Medibank. Two-and-a-half years of planning and political battles ensued, including rejection in the Senate three times, a double dissolution election fought largely on health issues, passing of the legislation in a joint sitting of both Houses in 1974, and implementation of Australia’s first universal health insurance scheme, Medibank, in July 1975. For the first time, everyone could have free access to a public hospital as a public patient.

After the fall of the Whitlam government in November 1975, Medibank was progressively dismantled by the Fraser Government, and John took on a new role as Director of the NHMRC Health Economics Research Unit at the Australian

National University (ANU). In 1980, sensing that a change in government was possible, John teamed up with Neal Blewett, then Shadow Minister for Health in the Bill Hayden-led Labor Opposition, to develop what would become Medicare.

Introduced on 1 February 1984, only 11 months after the election of the Hawke government in March 1983, Medicare gained universal acceptance in a relatively stable political decade, to the point where all sides of politics embraced it.

Following on from the initial work of others, notably Dr Sidney Sax, John advocated for a central collection body for national statistics on health status and health services use. The Australian Institute of Health (now Australian Institute of Health and Welfare or AIHW) was established within the Department of Health for this purpose, and John was its first Director between 1985 and 1986 before it became an independent statutory authority in 1987. John also served on the Health Care Committee of the National Health and Medical Research Council, was Chair of the National Health Technology Advisory Panel and a major contributor to the National Health Strategy coordinated by the Department of Health.

From 1989 to 2005 John was Senior Fellow in Epidemiology and Adjunct Professor in Economics at the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health at the ANU. In 1994 he was awarded the Australian Healthcare and Hospitals Association’s Sidney Sax Medal for his outstanding contribution to health services policy, organisation, delivery and research. He was awarded an Order of Australia (AO) in 1996, with the citation reading ‘In recognition of services to community health in the fields of health economics and health insurance policy development’. In 2009 John became a Life Member of the AHHA, which subsequently created the Deeble Institute for Health Policy Research in 2011, with John as its Patron.

As important as his achievements were, John was also renowned for his personal qualities. Former colleague Professor Peter Read, said:

He treated everyone the same—princes or paupers, cabinet ministers or cabinet makers—all were treated with dignity and respect. He was genuinely interested in people and listened intently to their views, not always agreeing but always giving them the courtesy of a hearing. I never once heard John raise his voice and if he was critical of anyone, his criticism was about policy or ideas, never personal. It was not in John’s make up to be mean spirited to anyone.

Vale Professor John Deeble, Architect and Father of Medicare, who leaves an enduring legacy to the nation.

Nigel Harding, Australian Healthcare and Hospitals Association