Emeritus Professor Rick Speare AM died in a motor vehicle accident on the night of Sunday June 5th while travelling from his property on the Atherton Tablelands down to James Cook University to present a Master’s of Public Health Course.

Rick’s was a life of learning, friendships, humour and above all, generous concern and care for other beings. He was awarded his Bachelor of Veterinary Science (1st class honours) in November 1970 and his Medical Bachelor, Bachelor of Surgery (1st class honours) in November 1975, both degrees from the University of Queensland. During the period of his Medical Course he also ran a part-time veterinary practice in Brisbane, Western Australia and Papua New Guinea. In 1976 he became Resident Medical Officer at Townsville General Hospital and subsequently in 1977 Medical Registrar there and resident Medical Officer at Alice Springs Hospital.

Rick commenced PhD studies at James Cook University in 1978 under the supervision of Bruce Copeman while maintaining his hand in both veterinary and medical practice. Because of his medical background, Bruce suggested a project on *Strongyloides* in aboriginal communities. Rick, however, was more interested in wildlife at the time and provided substantial veterinary advice to Peter Johnson, a National Parks and Wildlife officer, based in Townsville, who successfully set up captive breeding colonies of various endangered macropodid species in north Queensland. Although ultimately successful, the early days of these colonies were fraught, with disease causing significant mortality and Rick’s support proved to be vital in the resolution of many of the health problems encountered in the early days.

The chance finding of a case of fatal gastric strongyloidiasis in a captive spectacled hare wallaby, changed the course of his PhD to one on *Strongyloides* in animals, particularly
macropodids. Rick developed considerable expertise in this area which did subsequently manifest itself in research on Strongyloides in humans. One notable finding of his involvement with the colonies was that long-term treatment of macropodids to control Strongyloides infections with benzimidazoles was problematical as the drugs were (unexpectedly) toxic and caused the deaths of treated wallabies. Rick spent a substantial part of his time during his PhD collecting parasites and pathological lesions from marsupials in the Townsville region. His supervisors were extremely tolerant, but probably saw that they had little option as Rick always determined his own path.

In 1980, his wife Kerry undertook a diploma in Tropical Medicine in London, and although Rick was charged with family duties, he managed to spend time in a private veterinary practice and in the Parasitic Worms Section of The Natural History, London, leaving behind such significant mementos as a stuffed koala with a hat of dangling corks which, when wound up, sings Waltzing Matilda – to this day a prized component of their ‘colonial’ collection. Later that year they travelled to Paris with young son Luke and Kerry nearly 8 months pregnant with their daughter Sally. Here he joined an Aussie colleague on sabbatical at the Laboratoire de Vers, Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle to write several papers on a remarkable nematode in kangaroos and wallabies.

In 1987, Kerry obtained a medical position in Lilongwe, Malawi, and Rick followed with the family. Initially, he sought a position as a veterinary pathologist at the central veterinary laboratory, a position which was then vacant. His attempts were unsuccessful, but probably the position was not really essential as animals submitted for post mortem were taken home and eaten by the technical staff. He finally found a position as Medical Officer at Kamuzu Central Hospital in Lilongwe as a medical pathologist, spending most of his time conducting post mortems on AIDS patients. Realising the risks to himself, he promptly contacted friends in Australia to obtain metal mail gloves such as those used by abattoir workers to minimise the possibility of contracting AIDS through accidental cuts. He also served as a Lecturer at Kamuzu College of Health Sciences to first year trainee Clinical Officers in subjects of Anatomy and Physiology, and in Infectious Diseases.

He returned to Townsville in 1988 as a Research Fellow in the Department of Tropical Veterinary Science at James Cook University and engaged in diseases of amphibians, in the early days of looking for a biological control agent for cane toads. On a social outing near Townsville, he collected some sick frogs, leading to the isolation and subsequent work on flavivirises in amphibians. Although they killed cane toads, they also killed native frogs and were therefore not ideal biological control agents.

Determining the cause of amphibian declines had been the most urgent biological problem of the decade, the aetiology of which initially had eluded biologists worldwide. Rick led the Australian research team which discovered that chytridiomycosis was the cause of this worldwide amphibian decline and extinction. His group remained at the forefront of research on this disease, with in-depth studies on epidemiology, pathogenesis, diagnosis and management. Chytridiomycosis became recognised as the worst disease affecting vertebrate biodiversity in recorded history. As a direct result of his efforts, improved quarantine and health screening have been implemented nationally and internationally. He influenced the decision of the OIE (World Organisation for Animal Health) to list chytridiomycosis as a “notifiable disease” – the first disease of concern only to biodiversity.

In January 1991 Rick transferred from Veterinary Science to become Associate Professor and Director of the Anton Breinl Institute for Tropical Health and Medicine based in the original building at Townsville General Hospital. He was a fitting successor to Anton Breinl, especially when you entered the main door and saw the glass case containing Breinl’s scientific equipment - his microscope and his shotgun. Breinl was a medical graduate but with a major interest in diseases transmitted from wildlife to humans. Rick once jokingly
referred to the Institute as the only major medical research facility primarily interested in diseases of amphibians. Rick, however, also pursued many research interests of purely medical interest. A major one was head lice and treatments for infestations. This research involved maintaining colonies of lice for experimental purposes. The maintenance of colonies was facilitated in part by bribing family members to act as hosts, but was not successful in the longer term as louse resistance developed.

Another major interest of his was the health of aboriginal communities. With his combined veterinary and medical background, he actively pursued the control of Sarcoptes infections in camp dogs as an ancillary means of the control in humans. Both Rick and Kerry had had a long medical association with the aboriginal community in Townsville and his involvement in the health of other aboriginal communities followed as a logical consequence of this earlier association. His involvement with hookworm infections in humans (eosinophilic enteritis) will be remembered by participants at a parasitology conference in Adelaide where he recounted how he had infected himself with the hookworm Necator americanus, and had then swallowed a minute camera, later recovering it from his faeces and accessing the sequences of hookworms actively feeding on blood in his own duodenum. All in the cause of using hookworms in the treatment of allergic and autoimmune diseases.

From 1993 to 2001 he was Associate Professor at the School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine, James Cook University, became Deputy Head of the School in 2002 and in 2005 became Professor, as well as Director of Anton Breinl Centre and Deputy Head of the School of Public Health, Tropical Medicine and Rehabilitation Sciences. During this time, his primary interest was the control of communicable diseases in human and animal populations.

Rick spent a vast amount of his time supervising postgraduate students in public health, in all the various aspects of the discipline, at times with over 25 students to supervise. This increasing focus on teaching (as well as his obviously outstanding abilities as a teacher) led to him having numerous invited teaching roles around the country and internationally, particularly in developing countries. He described his activities in developing countries as “capacity building”, a little surprising, given his contempt for bureaucratic euphemisms and bureaucracy in general. In fact, his demand as a teacher outside JCU and the bureaucratic rigidities of the University in accepting this situation was a significant factor in his resignation.

Instead, he established Tropical Health Solutions, a company aimed at improving health in the tropics through research and capacity building. In this regard, he made an outstanding contribution to the development of tropical health and medicine in Australia, Papua New Guinea and particularly the Pacific Islands where he continued his teaching activities in his ‘retirement’, uninhibited by the strictures of university bureaucracy.

Rick will be sorely missed by all of us whose lives he touched and those who have never forgotten his outstanding presentations at WDA meetings. His career was the epitome of the One Health concept, his life a great example of how to live.

Our condolences go to Rick’s wife, Kerry Kelly, his three sons, two daughters and five grandchildren.