

A Tribute to Dr Richard Koch by Debbie Colyer

Born in North Dakota, America, and later moved to Petaluma, California where he spent the majority of his childhood and teenage years. In 1941 Dr Koch graduated from Petaluma High School and soon after he joined the Army Air Corps and eventually became a part of the 458th Bombardment group. It was on his 13th mission, Easter Sunday 1944; his plane was shot down in Wistermoor, Germany, and he became a prisoner of war. A book caught his attention from the prison camp library named "The Doctors Mayo" a story about a family of doctors. This story inspired him and lead him to become fascinated with the complexity of the human body and more determined to become a doctor. Dr Koch wanted to become a doctor for a long time. At that time there was no way that he could afford to go to medical school except that as a veteran he had the GI bill that paid for his tuition and supplies. In May 1945 Dr Koch and the prisoners were released from the prison camp now he knew what he wanted to do with the rest of his life. To become a doctor and be able to help others.

In 1951, the Koch family moved back to California where Dr Koch would start a paediatric internship at The Children's Hospital, Los Angeles where he spent the next 59+ years of his life. In 1955 Dr Koch became the first director of the clinic for the study of mental retardation at The Children's Hospital, Los Angeles. This was a huge success but he found himself curious if developmental disabilities were always incurable; if in fact could they be treated if detected in time. Dr Koch lobbied tirelessly for newborn screening that could detect these metabolic disorders. Due to his work and others in his field it is now required by law. He was particularly interested in PKU, a common cause of mental retardation and because of mandatory newborn screening which included a test for PKU the disorder could be stopped in its tracks. After 1966 Dr Koch proudly stated "There was not a single institutionalisation for PKU in the entire state of California. Virtually every case has been caught and treated."

In 1961 Dr Koch sent a Medical Journal to The Children's Hospital at Camperdown (now moved to Westmead). This journal arrived on the doctor's desk the night before leading to my diagnosis of PKU. Many years passed and when I was seventeen the medical professional's world- wide still believed that people with PKU could live well off the diet. Except Dr Koch who kept his patients on diet which is the theory now. "Diet is for life". After I recommenced the diet I started to e-mail Dr Koch and his wonderful wife Jean, telling my story, and from there developed a deep friendship with both Dr Koch (Dick) his wife Jean and their family. In 1999 my mother, Jill and I were asked to speak at a conference at the University of Sydney with Dr Koch, his wife Jean, Dr Willard Centerwall, Professor Bob Henderson and Dr John Christodoulou. My parents and I were really honoured to be able to show both Dr Koch and Jean the beaches of Sydney. We spent the afternoon at Palm Beach and then having dinner at our house. We met up with the Koch's again in 2003 at the MDDA Conference in Brisbane. We had a great time with the Koch's and Kathryn Moseley at West Manly and Kangaroo Point. The Koch's have let me stay repeatedly at their lovely home, treating me as another daughter.

I really appreciate their deep friendship and kindness. I consider them my PKU parents as they are always looking after me. I am so lucky to have so many wonderful memories and will always cherish my time with them and my time at the Koch's cabin at Mineral King - such a magical place!

The last conference that we both attended was the NPKUA conference which was held in Dallas, Texas. The NPKUA honoured Dr Koch for all the work he had done for PKU over the many years. He will be always remembered in their PKU Hall of Fame. Many children had super heroes, my hero always was and always will be Dr Koch. He literally saved my life but also if it wasn't for the

medical journal he sent to The Children's Hospital at Camperdown, people who are born with PKU (who now are able to lead a normal and good quality life thanks to newborn screening) would be in institutions or homes left undiagnosed. Dr Richard Koch was truly an amazing and dedicated doctor. Such an interesting, kind and passionate person who I owe my life to. He is Dr PKU and leaves behind his PKU legacy. Losing Dr Koch was like losing my father all over again as he was my PKU father and he will be missed by millions, but, in particular his family and friends. He gave his PKU patients a great life, hope and so much of his knowledge and especially his time answering thousands of e-mails from adults and families who are dealing with PKU or other metabolic disorders around the world. Dr Koch is last of the great men who fought hard for treatment of PKU such as Dr Asbjorn Folling who discovered PKU, Horst Bickel who developed the formula, Dr Willard Centerwall – the wet diaper test and Robert Guthrie Newborn Screening. My condolences thoughts and prayers are with his wife Jean and his family. I am going to celebrate his life every opportunity I can.