

This is the unedited version of a profile which appeared in *Australian Doctor* in 2002. The published version may have had minor changes.

Profile: Norman Swan

CV in brief:

Present	Producer/presenter of ABC Radio National's The Health Report and ABC News Radio's Health Minutes
1996-2001	Co-host ABC Radio National's Life Matters program
2001-2002	Host of ABC TV's Health Dimensions and now makes specials for it
1987 - present	Principal, Norman Swan Medical Communications (A business specialising in health sector strategic planning and health publishing).
1989 - present	Co-editor, Choice Health Reader, Australia
1990 - 1994	General Manager Radio National, ABC
1980:	Member, Royal College of Physicians, Edinburgh
1976:	MBChB (University of Aberdeen)

As a boy growing up in Glasgow in the 1950s, Norman Swirsky had an early introduction to hardship. Money was tight, and his parents sometimes struggled to put food on the table for their three children.

His grandparents had been swindled when they fled pogroms in Russia, buying tickets for New York but instead being put ashore in Scotland, which had its own share of anti-Semitism.

The young Norman was called names at school, where it wasn't uncommon for the Jewish kids to be bullied. After the family business went bankrupt, his father couldn't find work - until he changed his surname to Swan.

Those early experiences left a mark. Now 49, Norman Swan is intolerant of injustice and, despite his success as one of Australia's pre-eminent broadcasters, is obsessed with financial security.

This helps explain why Swan takes on so much work, on top of his ABC TV and radio roles, making many concerned about his exhausting schedule. “Between you and me, I think he’s overdoing it,” says one colleague, and it is a common refrain.

Swan’s small office at the ABC is a mess - apart from a well-worn path from door to desk, the floor is smothered by papers, books, and journals. It seems an apt metaphor for a life so crowded with commitments that there is no time for tidying, no matter how much the self-confessed obsessive prefers a neat, aesthetic environment.

Lying on the floor are tapes of one of the programs of which Swan is most proud - a four-part documentary on the history of the Zionist idea and its role in the origins of the State of Israel, made in the early 1980s.

“In that series people predicted exactly what is happening now in Israel,” says Swan. “It was a very controversial series because it exposed all the issues developing in Israel at that time, including Jewish fundamentalism.”

Swan joined a Socialist-Zionist youth movement in his teens, and the Jewish traditions remain an important part of his life. His wife converted to Judaism, and he doubts he could have married someone who wasn’t Jewish.

“I could not have a Christmas tree or any Christian symbols around me because of what I know that means for my tradition and my history, and so I’m very sensitive to religious bigotry, even Jewish religious bigotry, of which there’s plenty.”

Also lying on his office floor is a framed, black-and-white photograph of an elderly man nursing a kangaroo. Swan tells an amusing tale, as is his wont, about the pensioner obsessed with caring for sick kangaroos who gave two-hourly massages to one injured animal and turned it regularly to prevent bedsores.

“I never got the story published,” says Swan ruefully. “I’m sure it was the quality of my writing.”

Clearly that was before Swan became so well known as an award-winning, fraud-busting journalist.

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Lee Sutton met her husband-to-be at the Royal Alexandra Hospital for Children in Sydney in 1979. They were paediatric registrars on night duty.

Swan, who at one stage had planned to become a psychiatrist, had come to Australia to spend a year working at the hospital before returning to paediatrics training in London.

But he was unsure whether his heart really lay with medicine. As a teenager, he had dreamt of becoming an actor and, now that he was away from class-conscious Britain where he had always felt somewhat of an outsider, he felt freer to take a risk and to try a media career.

Sutton's first impression was of a "guy with a really nice accent". On their first date, they went to the races - Swan probably fancied his chances, as he had managed to fund his trip to Australia with his racetrack winnings.

These days, Swan no longer gambles, but his melodic accent has become his public signature. While probably best known to the public as ABC's doctor journalist, in health circles he is almost as well known for his other enterprises.

Scarcely a week passes where Swan is not addressing a conference, running a workshop, or facilitating a strategic planning session for universities, hospitals, health departments and other health organisations. He is also a regular with the Rural Health Education Foundation, doing educational broadcasts to GPs.

There are occasional mutterings in ABC corridors about the potential for this work to conflict with his journalism, but Swan stresses he is careful to keep a boundary between the two. Most of his outside work is in health policy, on which he rarely reports, believing it doesn't interest the public much.

He notes that he personally knew some of the key characters in his recent report on allegations of scientific fraud at the University of NSW,

and had previously helped the university's medical faculty develop a strategic plan.

"When the dice were down and I had a story that was adverse to them, I did it - that's what you've just got to do," he says.

Swan does all the extracurricular work, he says candidly, for the income - to keep three teenagers at private schools, which would not be possible on his ABC income. "If I won lottery, I'd just focus on broadcasting," he says.

Swan says he developed the skills for engaging disparate interests in workshops and strategic planning in the early 90s, when managing Radio National and its "rowdy, fractious" staff who are "cantankerous and difficult to manage".

It was a traumatic time for many at the ABC, including Swan, who oversaw many redundancies. He also brought in new talent, notably Geraldine Doogue and Phillip Adams.

Friends remember that Swan put on weight and was strung out during this period. He believes he became clinically depressed. At one meeting of senior executives, he asked how many were, like him, suffering insomnia.

Everyone but the managing director, David Hill, put up their hands, he says.

Some ABC staffers were critical of Swan's management style at the time, but Doogue, a close friend, believes he left a positive, lasting mark upon the network.

However, she adds, he can be pugnacious. "Not terribly long ago, I had occasion to tell him he'd gone too far in an internal memo," she says. "He's a real fighter, if he believes a cause is just, he just goes for it.

"If he decided managers were a bit of a dickhead, it was pretty hard for them to rehabilitate themselves. He doesn't like people who take no risks in life, he's pretty intolerant of them."

Swan, who seems to enjoy critical self-analysis, adds that he can also be intolerant of fools, understands why some might perceive him as aloof, and that he is a confirmed pessimist.

“I always think the worst and assume the worst and that has never failed me,” he says. “Pessimism is a pretty huge survival mechanism. If you are a constructive pessimist, you actually don’t assume anything about anybody. I don’t assume when I go on air that everything’s been done - I will double check.

“When planning a workshop, I will imagine someone in the room, the most cynical, nasty bastard who doesn’t want to be there...and I design the whole workshop for that person.”

Similarly, he assumes when writing radio scripts that no-one wants to listen, and that he must grab attention. On air, he strives to engage an imaginary, hostile listener.

Swan’s self-description - he also says he is dour, sometimes grumpy and not particularly gregarious - surprises many who know him better as a charming, witty raconteur, a warm, loyal friend and a father closely involved in his children’s lives. He’s also known for enjoying a good gossip.

“He’s very boyish; he’s got a real Peter Pan streak, which I find really endearing,” says one friend, the University of Sydney’s Associate Professor Simon Chapman.

ABC colleague Robyn Williams, who was resuscitated by Swan when his heart stopped, adds: “For someone who is so absolutely driven, he is also a complete sweetie.”

“A very modern man in the sense that he’s tuned into peoples’ sensitivities...and genuinely interested in women’s issues,” says another friend, social commentator Bettina Arndt.

And Sutton - now a paediatrician at the Royal Hospital for Women (who loathes being introduced at medical conferences as Mrs Swan, as occasionally happens) - remarks on his “incredible energy and zest for living”, his knack for communicating with teenagers, and his wizardry in the kitchen, where “he specialises in cooking with no recipes”.

Swan does a good line in self-deprecation. Asked for his predictions of the future of health care, after mentioning that he addresses

conferences on this subject, he laughs: “Fucked if I know - I spend 45 minutes saying, I’m fucked if I know”. Those who have heard Swan’s thoughtful speeches on this subject will realise this is not entirely true.

Swan seems prone to gym-induced injuries, and says he is also something of a hypochondriac. When swatting for his pathology final as a medical student, and reading up on poor survival rates for osteosarcoma of the knee, he noticed a lump on one knee.

Drenched in sweat and convinced his demise was imminent, he raced to the office of the professor of orthopaedics, dramatically threw his leg up on the desk, displayed the lump, and asked how long he had left.

“Would you like to feel your other knee?” the professor smiled. “There’s a lump just like it on the other side.”

Says Swan: “I’ve got a very strong fear of death. It’s more of an egotistical thing - you can’t imagine the world without you in it.”

Associate Professor Lyn March, a well known rheumatologist at Sydney’s Royal North Shore Hospital, still remembers the advice she was given by Swan, then a registrar, when she started as an intern at the hospital.

He told her to always have everything ready and at her fingertips when performing procedures. She remembers being surprised by Swan’s move away from medicine because “he was such a good doctor”.

“He still stands out as one of the key, influential people in my training,” she says.

Medicine’s loss has been the media’s gain, she adds, describing Swan as a reporter with strong views who seeks the truth in a rational, evidence-based, balanced way.

While Swan thinks of himself as a journalist rather than a doctor these days, some see him as a public health advocate.

Ian Webster, emeritus professor of public health at the University of NSW, was instrumental in Swan's appointment to the board of the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre. He says Swan probably has a greater breadth of knowledge about health care than anyone else in Australia.

"He's been an extraordinarily important vehicle for public health. I think Australia is more balanced than almost any other country in how we respond to public health issues and I believe The Health Report is a key agency for that."

Professor Webster adds: "Whenever I've been interviewed by him, I feel really tested. He fearlessly asks the right questions."

Wendy Oakes, a long-standing medical journalist working with Swan on ABC TV's Health Dimensions series, is another fan: "The thing that people don't fully appreciate is that he's a good medical journalist because he's a good journalist and not because he's a doctor."

"He's prepared to ask the hard questions. In the nicest possible way, he makes people justify why they are telling us this information, and what evidence they have for this information. He's prepared to risk annoying or offending people who might be considered his colleagues or his peers."

Swan's exposes of scientific skulduggery have won many prestigious journalism awards, but he doesn't enjoy doing these stories because of the costs to all involved. When approached by potential whistle blowers, he makes sure they understand the trauma that will follow.

When Swan broke the news of fraud by one-time medical hero William McBride, he copped flak from such prominent types as John Laws, Alan Jones and Frank Devine, to name just a few. At least one senior scientist was also critical, privately suggesting it would have been better to have the matter dealt with behind closed doors.

The latest allegations, against University of NSW researcher Professor Bruce Hall, have divided the medical community, says Swan. "There are people who think Bruce is innocent and I've done the dirty on him."

Swan's broadcast alleged serious scientific misconduct by Professor Hall, including misrepresentation of results and misappropriation of tax payer sourced research funds, and also charged university administrators with failing to investigate complaints appropriately. The allegations are being investigated by an independent inquiry. Professor Hall's wife, Dr Suzanne Hodgkinson, who was also named in the report, has filed a statement of claim against Swan and the ABC.

"I got no pleasure out of exposing McBride or Bruce Hall because the collateral damage to them and their families is huge," says Swan. "But the stories need to be told."

Sutton, for one, is glad that Swan plans not to do more scientific fraud stories. She says they involve too much work and emotional strain: "I don't think it's worth it."

The stories which Swan most enjoys are those involving narrative, drama and emotion, and he also loves the immediacy and intimacy of radio.

Swan has not escaped the effects of the ABC's internecine fighting and tight budgets - he puts The Health Report together with a weekly commissioning budget of just \$45, and his disappointment at the direction of the Health Dimensions series (George Negus took over his role as host) is well known.

Some colleagues believe he is not properly appreciated within ABC echelons. He is on a one-year contract, and at the time of this interview was still involved in "unpleasant" negotiations over its renewal.

"In many ways, I've repeated my father's story in that I've abandoned a secure career for something that's insecure," says Swan. He contributed a chapter about his relationship with his father, who left medical school to play saxophone in dance bands during the war, to a 1996 book, *Fathers and Sons*.

But it's clear Swan has no regrets about what he has often described as the midlife crisis of his 20s, when he gave up the security of paediatric practice.

He does harbour dreams, however, of another career shift - making a movie. "The game plan is to come up with a couple of scripts and to see whether I can make them fly," he says. "That is the thing that is left to be done."