



Rebel with a cause

Anthony Lowe

The actuary with a big heart and mind



If you're not already in the know, September is International Prostate Cancer Awareness Month – a time to raise awareness of an illness that affects 20,000 Australian men and their loved ones each year. What better time for us to meet an actuary who is leading the charge in this field, Dr Anthony Lowe, CEO of the Prostate Cancer Foundation of Australia (PCFA). The journey he's taken to where he is today is, in his own words "something I would never have imagined when I first started out."

Anthony began his career, as many actuaries do, in the financial services world. Even this was not entirely planned.

"At the age of 16, I dreamed of being a theoretical physicist, and my heroes were people like Albert Einstein and Erwin Schrödinger (one of the founders of quantum mechanics). My high school maths teacher gave me the confidence to study mathematics at a higher level. But, after completing my undergraduate studies and a PhD in Mathematics at Cambridge and Southampton Universities, I realised I wasn't quite good enough to do that – I really took it as far as I could," Anthony explains.

"So I looked for an occupation that would use my existing skills and put food on the table. Being an actuary seemed to fit the bill nicely – and it sounded like interesting work."

A career was born. Anthony began his actuarial training with consulting actuaries



Anthony Lowe being interviewed by Candice Sng, and right Anthony promoting the Big Aussie Barbie.

R. Watson & Sons (now part of Towers Watson) in 1987 at Reigate and then Birmingham in the UK, where he eventually became a Partner.

Since then Anthony's career has focused on managerial rather than purely actuarial and analytical roles. He's held senior executive positions in the financial services industry in Australia, the US and UK, including with Watson Wyatt, AMP and Mercer – ultimately becoming an Executive Director and Asia-Pacific business Group Leader at Mercer Wealth Solutions. A particular highlight was the opportunity to manage Mercer's benefits administration business in New Jersey, Kentucky and Chicago in the US.

"Peter Coster, the former CEO of Mercer globally, once told me that everybody should, at some time in their lives, work in another country. It opens up your mind to different ways of doing business, different cultures and ideas," says Anthony. "Personally, I'd always been curious to live in the US, so when the opportunity arose, I took it, and we spent three wonderful years there."

"It was an interesting time to be in the States, only a year since September 11 happened, and it was still very much in the minds of Americans, which manifested itself in a heightened sense of patriotism. Also, apart from the obvious differences in pension systems – with many more defined benefit funds, I found managing teams in the US was very different to Australia and even the UK – for one, staff there are much more outcomes-focused, and tend to be less likely to speak their mind when they disagree with management. Aussies are much more comfortable with that!"

After returning to Australia with Mercer Wealth Solutions and seeing through a number of strategic projects as Asia Pacific Business Group Leader, Anthony had achieved all he wanted to in the financial services world, and was ready for the next challenge.

"I had always planned to eventually give back to the community by working in the not-for-profit sector, and originally thought it might be in the area of the performing arts, which is a great passion of mine. At that point I thought to myself, what else could I do with the skills I had acquired?" Anthony recalls.

Looking at the considerable suite of capabilities he'd developed over the course of his career – broad enough to encompass financial management, IT systems restructuring, HR management, and managing teams in various countries, as luck would have it, these were just the skills that would suit a Chief Operating Officer (COO) position.

"Fortunately, just at the time I was looking, I found an ad on Seek – the National Breast Cancer Foundation (NBCF) was looking for a COO. I applied, and was lucky enough to get the job!" Anthony says. "I was able to bring all those skills I had to bear on what was a comparatively small organisation, but one that had grown incredibly fast."

"Sue Murray, CEO of the NBCF, was a true inspiration for me – she took the organisation from a mere two people and a tiny income to 35 staff and \$20m income a year. She was a real hands-on, constantly positive leader whom I learnt a great deal from."

After four years with the NBCF, Anthony landed the role of CEO of PCFA, a position he's held for just over a year now. Anthony admits there are some big differences between the transferrable actuarial skills that can be brought to a COO role and the skills needed as the Chief Executive of an organisation.

"There are some actuarial and COO skills that have helped me in my current role – financial analysis, business strategy, big picture HR management, for example. But as CEO I also do a lot of lobbying and media liaison. It's a much higher profile position, particularly in a community organisation like PCFA. A recent highlight was being on the *Today* show talking about a new therapy for Australian men living with advanced prostate cancer," says Anthony.

Anthony has some comforting advice for actuaries looking to the future. "As actuaries we tend to focus on the detail – but I would say to young actuaries, don't try to plan it out too much. As one of the senior Watsons Partners, Vince Chambers, once told me, opportunities will always come along for smart people. I've found that the more senior you get, the harder it is to try to map out where your career will take you. There's no way I would have guessed that I would one day be CEO of Prostate Cancer Foundation of Australia."

"Also, try not to have regrets, and always be optimistic. As my mum always told me, pull your socks up and just get on with it."

Anthony encourages actuaries with an interest in working in the not-for-profit sector to get involved, and believes actuarial skills are very transferrable to community-based organisations who, like private companies, are always in need of sound financial management.

"The biggest challenge for community organisations like PCFA is to do the most we can with scarce resources. Unlike companies though, we are mission-driven, and there is always more work we could be doing."

Anthony recommends that those looking to work in the community sector begin building their network of contacts early – talking to people involved in such organisations, and volunteering.

"At the most basic level, look at your LinkedIn profile – does it only contain people in your organisation or industry? Broaden your network through functions, through your work. That will make a transition to the community sector easier," he says.

Turning to his work with PCFA, Anthony explains that the purpose of the Foundation is reducing the impact of prostate cancer on Australian men, their partners, families and the wider community, by:

- promoting and funding world leading, innovative, research;
- implementing awareness campaigns and education programs; and
- supporting men and their families affected by prostate cancer.

"Our annual community surveys show that PCFA's work is having a positive impact on awareness of this disease, but there is still much to be done. Sadly, this year more than 20,000 Australian men will be diagnosed with prostate cancer and 3,300 will die of the disease," says Anthony.

As well as being International Prostate Cancer Awareness Month, September is also the month of the Big Aussie Barbie, encouraging Australians everywhere to hold a true blue BBQ to raise funds for PCFA. Events will be held in capital cities including the kick-off event in Martin Place, Sydney on 31 August. For more information, visit www.bigaussiebarbie.com.au.

"I encourage readers to get involved and hold your own Big Aussie Barbie in your workplace, neighbourhood or sports club," Anthony says. "Fundraising events like this fund vital research and support services to Australians suffering the effects of prostate cancer." **A**