

THANK GOD FOR FIONA

ONE DAY WITH THE AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR

FIONA WOOD is an unlikely media star. For one, she is a plastic surgeon and medical researcher, an occupation not usually high on the celebrity charts. For another, she cherishes her family's privacy and hates, simply *hates*, posing for photos, especially if there's hair and make-up involved. "I don't do make-up," she says with breathless incredulity.

"*Ever*. It's like 'Are you kidding?'" And thirdly, she's almost too clever for her own good. Often when she speaks, it's like listening to a multi-track stereo or watching a group of athletes break the starter's gun – too many thoughts trying to sprint from the brain to the roof of the mouth at the one time.

The result is Fiona Wood sometimes gives you – in between sparks of homespun wisdom, deep intelligence and girlish laughter – sentences half-formed or murdered completely. There's just not enough time, it would seem, to form them properly. Too many other things to do – like save people's lives, a fact which millions of Australians discovered in those cruel, agonising days and weeks following the first Bali bombing three years ago. It was then that this Yorkshire-born plastic surgeon and mother of six emerged reluctantly into the spotlight, because of her pioneering research into a spray-on skin technique known as Cellspray.

Instead of patients having to wait up to five days for their skin to be successfully grown in a laboratory – they'd previously

waited 21 days, before Fiona Wood revolutionised the process and brought it down to 10 days, then five – now suddenly their microscopic skin cells could be cooked in an enzyme solution for half an hour in the operating theatre and sprayed on. It meant, literally, the difference between life and death. It also meant that the research Fiona had been quietly working on in an anonymous laboratory for a decade, with scientist Marie Stoner, was now the focus of national attention. It transformed her life completely.

She was now a revered public figure, soon to be named West Australian of the Year two years running (2004 and 2005) and then, in January this year, Australian of the Year.

In her quest to improve the treatment of burns injuries, Fiona had long planned for a disaster where speed in dealing with victims would be of the essence. A major fire, perhaps, or an industrial accident on the North West Gas Shelf, but nothing on the scale of Bali – not so many people so quickly and with such appalling injuries.

The first wave of Bali victims arrived at the Royal Perth Hospital within 26 hours of the bombings. By Tuesday, October 15, 2002, most of the others were there as well – 28 coming via Darwin, then three from the east coast. (Normally, the hospital would average 10 major burns patients per year.)

All elective surgery had to be stopped, new theatres opened up, blood and >>>

She was the saviour of so many Bali burns victims in 2002 and the co-inventor of a revolutionary spray-on skin, but outgoing Australian of the Year Dr Fiona Wood won't stop there. **David Leser** talks to this inspiring plastic surgeon and mother of six.

Surgeon Fiona Wood, 47, has boundless energy and intellect. Before this photo was taken around 9am, she had already done her paperwork and cycled 40 kilometres.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARTIN MISCHKUNIG, HAIR AND MAKE-UP BY KATIE GROCKER

“I SAW A VERY BADLY SCARRED CHILD. AND I THOUGHT, ‘YOU’VE GOT TO BE ABLE TO DO SOMETHING MORE ABOUT THIS.’”

surgical reconstruction products urgently sought, and a team of 150 surgeons, anaesthetists, physiotherapists, plus psychiatrists, nurses, dieticians, pain specialists and infection-control experts brought in, indeed, a whole surgical plan drawn up to meet the crisis. For five days and nights, Fiona and her team worked tirelessly to cope with terrorism’s bloody harvest – massive burns, shrapnel wounds, blast injuries, dehydration, shock and the onset of blood-borne infections.

“The most amazing thing about her,” says Dale Edgar, vice-president of the Australian New Zealand Burns Association and Royal Perth Hospital’s (RPH) senior physiotherapist, “is her boundless level of energy, which you can tap into and feed off, and hopefully try and run along with for a while.

“Eventually, you fall behind and you have to gather your strength and try and catch up with her again ... She has a multi-track mind and can compartmentalise things. We often talk here about juggling and keeping balls in the air. Balls are nicer than chainsaws and daggers.”

In the aftermath of the Bali terror attacks, it was all chainsaws and daggers. Three patients died in the days and weeks that followed the Kuta attacks, one of them Simone Hanley, 28, who battled for 56 excruciating days in ICU before succumbing to her injuries. (Simone’s sister, Renae Anderson, was killed while standing outside the Sari Club.)

“That was the lowest point I saw Fiona go through,” says Dale. “She would have tears in her eyes whenever she talked about Simone. The worry on her face was obvious in the weeks before Simone passed on. Fiona honestly thought she would have to do four limb amputations to this woman to reduce the bacteria in her body. That was what was on the cards and that was how far she was willing to go to save someone.”

Anthony Svilichich was luckier, although for a few perilous weeks there it didn’t appear he would be. He arrived on the second plane out of Bali, with burns to 64 per cent of his body, shrapnel wounds to both knees, permanent damage to one ear drum and a range of deadly micro-organisms that couldn’t be treated with antibiotics. He’d been sitting at the bar of the Sari Club, 15 metres from where the bomb exploded, but managed to walk out through an illuminated hole in the wall.

Once in Perth, he’d been placed in an induced coma for 44 days and on at least two occasions given electric shock to restart his heart. During that time, Fiona Wood performed three operations on him, including one in which she reconstructed his entire back. When he woke he had no idea where he was, nor how he’d got there, only that he might have just seen his “guardian angel”.

“Fiona came into the burns unit around December 6,” Anthony tells *The Weekly* now, “50 days after I’d gone into ICU, and just asked how I was going. I said I was feeling not bad and then she walked out. I said, ‘What’s your name?’ and she smiled and said, ‘Fiona’.

“She came and went like the wind.”

DURING THE LATE 1960S, in the grim, coal-mining town of Frickley in Yorkshire, they used to call Fiona Wood the Frickley Flyer, owing to the fact she was so fast on her feet.

She used to run for the local collieries and recalls before one particular race sitting on her father’s shoulders, listening to firebrand union leader Arthur Scargill exhorting his striking miners to “set no limits” in their struggle against the Macmillan government. Those words made a lasting impression on her, as did the fate of the miners years later, when they lost their jobs. “I remember being profoundly affected,” she says. “I’d never seen people begging in the streets of Yorkshire before.”

Fiona’s father, Geoff Wood, a miner himself, was often called upon to perform dangerous rescue missions. A man of high intellect, he hated his work and was determined that none of his four children would ever suffer the same grinding poverty or lack of opportunities he and his wife, Elsie, had known.

Both of them believed in the power of sport and education to transform a person’s life. Elsie, a physical education teacher, had transferred to a Quaker school so her children could get a better education.

Their eldest son, Geoff, had gone from being a shopfitter to a lawyer. He was also a champion boxer and cyclist. Another son, David, had become an orthopaedic surgeon and representative rugby player, as well as a 400-metre runner, while the fourth child, Nicola, had ended up working with children with



Known as the Frickley Flyer in her hometown in Yorkshire, Fiona was brought up by parents who believed in the power of sport and education to transform a person’s life.

learning difficulties. She, too, could run like the wind.

Fiona, herself, was so bright her own teachers thought she might be stupid, mad or both. Eventually, she skipped a year and became head girl and dux of the school. Brilliant at maths and science, she decided to become a surgeon and gained admission to St Thomas’s Hospital Medical School in London. Early on in her medical career, she became fascinated by burns. “I saw a very badly scarred child,” she says of a four-year-old girl scalded by a hot cup of coffee. “And I thought, ‘You’ve got to be able to do something more about this.’ It is not just a cosmetic thing, it’s functional. The whole package – the itchiness, the pain, the restriction of movement, the way it looks and acts.”

She’d also met scarred World War II fighter pilots, members of the so-called Guinea Pig Club, who’d managed to live

extraordinarily full lives despite their deformities. One of them had no feet, half a hand and no fingers on his other hand. His friends called him Fingers.

In 1985, Fiona Wood met and married Western Australian-born surgeon Tony Keirath and, in 1987, they moved to Perth with their two small children, Tom and Jess. “It’s non-negotiable,” Tony had reportedly told her. “You marry me and you live in Perth.”

Over the next few years, as Fiona completed her plastic surgery training, she had four more children. “If you can fill the unforgiving minute with 60 seconds’ worth of distance run ...” her father had told her repeatedly, quoting from Rudyard Kipling’s poem *If*. She took him at his word.

I’D BEEN WARNED THAT FIONA Wood was so busy she could make conventionally busy people look like freeloaders: director of the RPH’s burns unit; director of the WA burns service; consulting plastic surgeon at Princess

Margaret Hospital for children; clinical professor with the School of Paediatrics and Child Health at the University of Western Australia; co-founder of C3 or Clinical Cell Culture, a private company recognised throughout the world for its research and breakthroughs in the treatment of burns; director of the McComb Research Foundation ... and all this in addition to being a wife and mother of six children between the ages of 10 and 18 ... and in addition to being Australian of the Year, which has required her to crisscross the country all year for speaking engagements ... and in addition to building a new house in a seaside suburb of Perth ...

“Her normal activities are 300 per cent more than most people,” says Joy Fong, clinical consultant in the burns unit and a colleague of Fiona’s for nearly 20 years. “Now it is 400 per cent. She doesn’t stop.

“But I can’t say enough about her. She is a very, very kind person ... she is also about 20 years ahead of everyone in her planning and thinking. She makes our

world go around, the world of her children and the world of the burns service in Western Australia.

“A couple of years ago, though, [when she also had a private practice] it was too much. You could never catch her and I was sick of talking to her from behind. And when you did talk to her, you needed a tape recorder because it would all come out whoosh ... So many thoughts all coming out at once. Now she’s catchable.”

Yet only just.

We meet on the 11th floor of the Royal Perth Hospital, in the newly-built Telstra Burns Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Unit, which Prince Charles visited earlier this year. Sporting a pink Lisa Ho outfit, string of soft satin Broome pearls and a pair of sunglasses perched on brushed-back wet hair, she looks more like the poster girl for middle-age cool – she is 47 – than Perth’s only female plastic surgeon. What’s more, she even uses terms such as “sass”, “airplay”, “no-brainer” and “24/7”.

“Hi, I’m Fiona Wood,” she says, greeting me in her office with a broad >>>



Fiona celebrates being named 2005 Australian of the Year with her six children (clockwise from left), Joe, now 14, Dan, 15, Tom, 18, Jess, 17, Jack, 12, and Evie, 10, in Canberra.

smile and a thick northern-England accent. It is 9am and – from Fiona’s point of view – the day is already four-and-a-half hours old. Up at 4.30am to do paperwork, she then went for a 40km bike ride at 6 o’clock, which she finished an hour-and-a-quarter later. (If truth be known, that ride was a complete doddle compared to what she did the day before.)

“Yesterday I rode about 140km,” she says, swallowing her words with laughter, “and it was a bit too far really. After about half of it, I couldn’t keep up any more, so I just went with the tail enders, cut a corner and went home. I was on the bike for about five-and-a-half hours, then I went to the beach. I went in the surf because I needed to be more buoyant.”

Of course. After finishing her bike ride this morning, Fiona then did a ward round of the burns unit, completed more paperwork, took a shower in the hospital and then arrived for this interview with *The Weekly*. Soon she will leave for the State Library to launch a campaign for the Australian Childhood Foundation, then hold a press conference with local media, before attending two research meetings in the early afternoon.

After that, she’ll pick up the children from school and, on the way to dropping them off at sports practice, she’ll conduct a three-way medical research conference call with England and Belgium. She’ll then pick the kids up, go home and cook dinner, put the younger ones to bed and resume her paperwork.

“I don’t know how she does it,” says daughter Jess. “She just doesn’t sleep. At med school she used to go to sleep just after the beginning of the lecture, wake up just before it ended and catch what was there from that. She’s trained herself not to need much sleep. Her idea of relaxation

is riding a bike.” This relentless quest for self-improvement has obviously rubbed off. At 17, Jess is already in second-year medical school and the school’s sports representative. When she was 11, she was selected for the state figure-skating team. She then turned to athletics and represented the state as a middle-distance runner. Two years ago, she went on an exchange program to India to live among street kids. She plans to be a surgeon like her parents.

Talking to *The Weekly* at a Perth

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cafe, she paints a fulsome word picture of her mother as a person ferociously competitive, but deeply principled and devoted to her children’s welfare.

“She is doing for us exactly what her parents did for her,” she says. “She always wants to do the best she can.”

When they were infants, Fiona would often take her children in a backpack while doing ward rounds. On weekends, she would put maths tests on the end of their beds, equations that, if answered correctly, would lead the children on a treasure hunt through the house.

Outside school hours, she would be arranging extra-curricular classes and sports camps. When she went overseas to a medical conference, she invariably took one of the children with her. And when it came to any sporting activity, she was always there urging them on or, better still, working out with them.

“We have a vineyard [down south],” says Jess, “and when we’re there, Mum would take me into town and train me. I’d be running around the track with

Mum screaming and yelling out my times, telling me about my techniques and encouraging me.”

And if you think Jess is the only one similarly driven or gifted like her mother, consider the rest of “The Incredibles”. Tony, the father, is a surgeon and a keen athlete who, each morning, either swims a few kilometres with his sons or goes for a 90km bike ride.

Eldest son Tom, 18, is already in third-year engineering and science at university. He represented the state in the triathlon. Brother Dan, 15, has, in the words of his mother, “an extraordinary intellect” and is currently studying German one night a week at university, in between attending school and kayak training. Later this year, as part of a school program, he will travel to Hanoi in Vietnam to live with orphans.

Then there’s Joe, 14, who by all accounts is the most athletic of them all, having just come fifth in the national triathlon championships. Not to be outdone, however, is Jack, 12, who’s into water polo, rugby and swimming, and Evie, 10, who’s into hockey, gymnastics and trampolining. Only last night, Evie bested Jack in a quick quiz.

“They were talking about William the Conqueror over dinner,” says Fiona, “and Evie got the answer before Jack did. They

were talking about 1066 and who was the guy who actually shot Harold in the eye with the arrow? She got it out before Jack and Jack was very perturbed because he’s the military historian in the family.”

Ask Fiona whether she fosters competition between her children and she replies, “I think the most healthy thing is doing the best for yourself. You don’t do anybody any favours by being less than you are in order to make other people comfortable. I don’t care whether you win or lose. What I care about is that you do your best.”

To the charge that she might appear like a super mum to women with half her workload, Fiona replies, “I’m really lucky that I’m fit and healthy, and that I’ve got the energy to operate on a lot of fronts. And I feel like it’s a duty almost to do it. I never expect anyone in my team or anyone around me to do what I do.

“[In fact] there’s a part of me that thinks I’m as mad as a cut snake.”

Which probably helps explain why, a couple of years ago, when the family >>>

FAIRFAX



Fiona with patients and 2002 Bali bomb survivors, (left to right) Gary Nash, Aaron Cowdery, Stuart Henderson, Tracey Bell, Melinda Kemp, Peter Hughes and Anthony Svlilich in hospital in Perth.

went on holidays to Borneo in Malaysia, Fiona insisted they all climb to the top of Mt Kinabalu, South-East Asia's tallest mountain.

"We stayed the night halfway up," Jess recalls, "and climbed the peak [4000 metres] at 2am. It was so high that the little ones were collapsing. Tom and I were really, really fit, but we couldn't take more than 20 steps without having to stop for breath.

"Then it got a bit tricky at the top and Jack [who was then 10] was exhausted, and there were a few vomits. Mum was very encouraging ... but Dan [13 at the time] wasn't too impressed. It was 2am and we hadn't eaten properly, and we couldn't breathe and he said, 'I've had enough, I don't want to go'. And Mum replied, 'There's no point in coming this far and not making it'."

EVEN A SMALL BURN can be a life-shattering event. To be burnt as badly as Mark Mulder almost defies comprehension. In 1992, while working as a roofing plumber on a building site in Perth, this father of two was set alight after leaking petrol ignited a nearby generator. By the time workmates had tackled him to the ground and doused the flames, most of his skin had already peeled off. There were burns to 90 per cent of his body, massive damage to the nerves and joints and, at one stage, almost complete organ shutdown. For three months, he lay in a coma. For a full year, he was in hospital.

With virtually no skin left to graft, Fiona decided to take a two-centimetre patch of skin from his groin – Mark had been wearing a nailbag when he ignited – and send it to a laboratory in Melbourne. The skin sample was then cultured and shipped back in flasks to Perth, where Fiona prepared the skin sheets in sections to staple onto the body.

"She took that little section," Mark tells *The Weekly*, "and about two weeks later she came back and said, 'I've got enough skin to cover you two or three times over' ... but she realised at that

point that covering more than 90 per cent of your body in that manner ... Well, there had to be a quicker way, because the quicker you can get the new skin on, the better."

Mark still has weakness in the upper limbs and problems with his nerves and joints, but he has resumed his job as a teacher and works out regularly in the gym. What has strengthened him is his faith in a higher power and his belief in Fiona Wood's place in that divine scheme. "My wife and I believe that we are an instrument in God's hand and that he used Fiona to save my life and to save many people's lives."

Fiona regards Mark as an inspiration and a catalyst for the research grant she applied for after his accident. She wanted to grow skin faster and she wanted to

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grow it in Perth. "The work out of Boston in the late '70s," she says, "demonstrated that you could harness the cells' regenerative capacity on the surface of the skin – the epidermis – so that you could then use it to cover the wounds. That was the starting point – looking at how we could enhance that technology to make skin cells available quicker.

"We were looking at how the cells changed in character and then we started to put them on as fluid, as single cells. We then thought, 'How do we get this on the surface?' Right, spray it on. So we worked out different spray techniques ... And that's really the Cellspray story."

By 1993, Fiona and scientist Marie Stoner had worked out how to save a day here, a day there.

"Simple things," she says, "like the

harvesting of skin. If it's thick skin, it takes longer for the enzyme to penetrate. If it's thin skin, it takes less time. So we were able to take it down [from 21 days] to 10 days pretty quickly because we focused on it. And then by 1994/5, we were down to five days and using the cells as a spray."

Seven years later, with Australia's first victims of terrorism being airlifted into Perth, Fiona found a way of reducing the time frame to 30 minutes. She did this by taking a small section of skin and cooking it in an enzyme solution, harvesting the cells and then spraying it on.

"Whatever I do," she says, "I work hard at it because that's what I am ... whether it's doing the surgery or riding the bike or trying to help the kids.

"But I don't see it as a race to the finish line. Someone asked me the other day, 'What's it like at the top?' and I thought, 'Where is the top?' The concept of the top is just kind of bizarre, really, because I've learnt over the years that things change. You ask one question in research, you may answer it, but you ought to ask another 12. You never actually get to this elusive top of the mountain."

So ask Fiona Wood what she still hasn't achieved and she replies, "From a professional point of view, scarless healing. Scarless healing is really my personal Holy Grail."

In the meantime, though, the C3 or Clinical Cell Culture business that Fiona and Marie Stoner established more than a decade ago, continues to lead the field and, from its base in Cambridge, England,

now exports this life-saving spray-on skin technology to Europe, Asia and, soon, the US. A percentage of the profits is always earmarked for research.

"Fiona could be swanning around making heaps of money doing cosmetic surgery," says one of her colleagues, Dr Bess Fowler, "but she prefers to do burns because she is seriously interested in assisting people who are suffering.

"I have never met anyone so brilliant nor someone able to do so much. All I try to do is keep her in sight as she goes toward the horizon ... She told me a story once that one of her boys [Joe] was in a triathlon and the wheel came off his bike, so he ran with his bike to the end ... he didn't think of stopping."

How could he, when he's got Fiona Wood for a mother? ■