

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
TIM BAUER

LONG BEFORE Marcus Blackmore became king of the largest nutraceutical empire in the southern hemisphere he used to study the scriptures of his father's faith, a heretic creed to many because of its fundamental belief in nature's healing powers.

"Doctors can bury their mistakes," Maurice Blackmore, the man regarded as the father of Australian naturopathy, used to tell his son. "So why do patients only come to seek my advice after they've been to five doctors without any results?"

It was a good question and Marcus Blackmore was keen to learn. In 1950, at the age of five, he used to visit his father in his Queensland naturopathic clinic and idle away the hours by sticking product labels into an exercise book: "Fluvacs" (a mixture of iron and potassium) to combat flu; "Pep Ups" (a multi-mineral formula to restore energy); "Renatone" (to tone the kidneys) ...

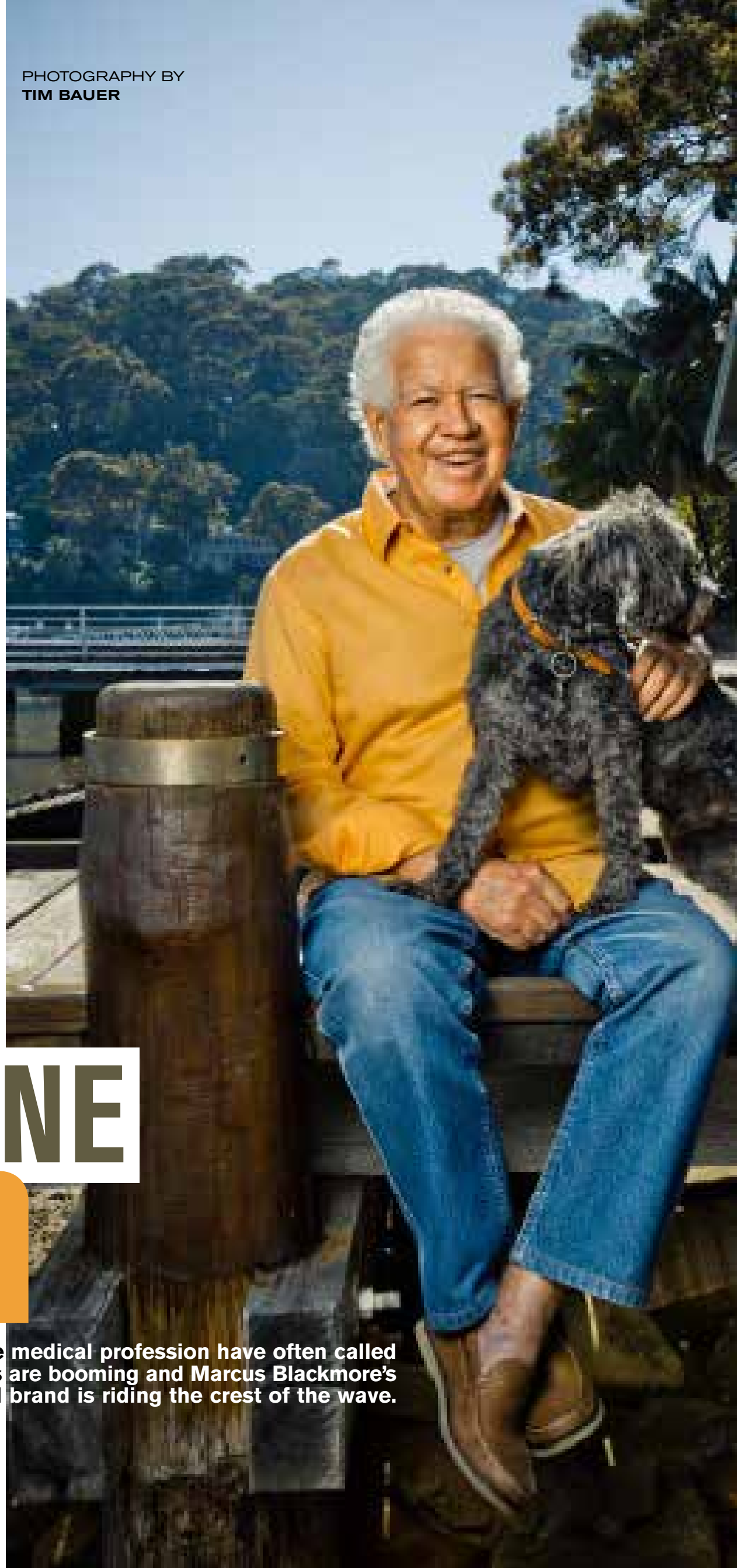
As a young teenager Marcus Blackmore learnt how to prepare skin creams and ointments, although during one school holiday he and a friend decided to concoct a laxative formula consisting of dates, raisin and senna. His friend – later to become an eminent doctor – couldn't stop licking his fingers for the taste. "The next day he just shitted himself away," says Blackmore now laughing. "He's never forgotten it."

Raised in a household that banned white sugar and white bread (but gave considerable license to Sanitarium nutmeat!), Blackmore began working for his father full-time at the age of 18. Over the years – as young bull clashed with old – he was sacked three times before eventually taking over the business at 28. That was in 1973 – 12 years before the company was publicly listed – and today Marcus Blackmore bestrides a complementary medicines industry in Australia that has grown 54 per cent in the past five years to be worth \$3.5 billion in revenue per annum, part of an estimated \$138 billion global market.

The MEDICINE man

"Quack remedies", naysayers in the medical profession have often called them, but natural health products are booming and Marcus Blackmore's Australian-owned nutraceutical brand is riding the crest of the wave.

BY DAVID LESER



During the past 12 months Marcus Blackmore's company, Blackmores Ltd, produced 19 million bottles and processed 2.2 billion tablets of minerals, vitamins and herbs, roughly equivalent to 75,000 bottles and 8.7 million tablets a day.

Chances are you ingested one yourself this morning. Perhaps Blackmores Acidophilus Bifidus to maintain healthy gut flora. Or Blackmores Bio C 1000mg Cold Relief to ward off a cold. Or the all-purpose highly popular Executive B Stress Formula to aid your adrenal glands and nervous system.

Such is the popular acceptance today of complementary medicines that an estimated 70 per cent of Australians are said to be regular users of a natural healthcare product.

Three years ago Marcus Blackmore and his colleagues provided a briefing session to federal politicians and bureaucrats following a report by Access Economics showing that millions of dollars in healthcare costs could be saved if complementary medicine was more widely used – without compromising patient outcomes.

The report indicated that taking fish oil was a highly cost-effective intervention to prevent heart disease; that the use of St John's wort for mild to moderate depression could save nearly \$50 million a year and that Phytodolor, a herbal remedy of leaves and barks, could reduce the cost of treatment for osteoarthritis.

Seated at the table were senior Labor and Liberal Party politicians, including Simon Crean, Julie Bishop, Philip Rudock and Peter Dutton.

Just as his father had done 70 years earlier, Marcus Blackmore was working the corridors of power to passionately argue the case for natural medicine. And being a consummate salesman he made sure a small bottle of "Pollie Pills" – it was Blackmores Executive B Stress Formula – was placed in front of everyone at the meeting. "All the bottles went," says Blackmores' chief executive Christine Holgate.

Although Blackmore only hints at it and Tony Abbott's office declined to respond to inquiries, it is understood that Australia's über-health conscious Prime Minister is a regular consumer of Blackmores products, as is the Speaker of the House, Bronwyn Bishop. Both are friends of Blackmore's but the political connections don't end there.

On a visit to Federal Parliament several years ago, the founder of the National Nutritional Association of Australia (now the Complementary Medicine Association) bumped into Senator Grant Tambling, then Parliamentary Secretary for Health. Blackmore had only been in the building a few minutes when politicians from both sides began glad-handling him. "I reckon half the people in this place take your product," Tambling observed." To which Blackmore replied: "At least half."

NATURAL CHARM:

Complementary health-products mogul Marcus Blackmore at home in Pittwater, NSW.

IN 2011 JILLIAN SKINNER, the NSW Minister for Health, lauded Blackmores for helping keep her macular degeneration at bay. "Not much can be done for dry macular degeneration except by way of diet and taking supplements," she told state parliament. "Lots of leafy vegetables helps and an egg a day ... and hazelnuts and fish and ... supplementary medications Lutein-Vision and Macu-Vision developed by Blackmores following representations from Paul Beaumont, a world leader in macular degeneration disease."

With this kind of political wink and nod – not to mention massive consumer acceptance – one might conclude the complementary medicines industry had finally overcome the hostility Marcus Blackmore's father faced during the 1930s, '40s and '50s (in 1942 Victoria the rallying cry from doctors was "oust the quacks").

"On my Dad's deathbed [in 1977] he said to me, 'The sad thing about my life, son, is I didn't see naturopathy become a profession.' And it still isn't really a true profession in that sense."

Which comes as some relief to John Dwyer, Emeritus Professor of Medicine at University of NSW, and founding President of Friends of Science in Medicine (FSM), a group formed in 2011 to combat the alarming increase in use – as they see it – of "non-proven alternative therapies". Along with public-health advocate Dr Ken Harvey, John Dwyer has been the group's most strident voice, attacking the "non-evidence based pseudo-science" of the complementary and alternative medicines industry and endeavouring to have certain courses removed from higher education.

In an email sent two years ago to a list of National Health & Medical Research Council reviewers – those appointed by NH&MRC to assess applications for funding – Dwyer made it clear that FSM wanted to see "nonsense" such as "homoeopathy, reflexology, kinesiology, healing touch therapy, chiropractic, acupuncture, iridology and energy medicine" removed from tertiary courses and for vice chancellors and deans to heed the call from his roster of "prominent scientists and clinicians".

(In April this year NH&MRC released its review into homoeopathy and concluded there was no reliable evidence for its effectiveness in treating health conditions.)

"Obviously you will only support good science," Dwyer wrote to the NH&MRC reviewers, "and may well be as frustrated as we are that 'pseudo-science' is flourishing. May we add your name to our list?"

According to Professor Stephen Myers, foundation head of Southern Cross University's School of Natural and Complementary Medicine, the email cast serious doubt on the independence of the NH&MRC review process.

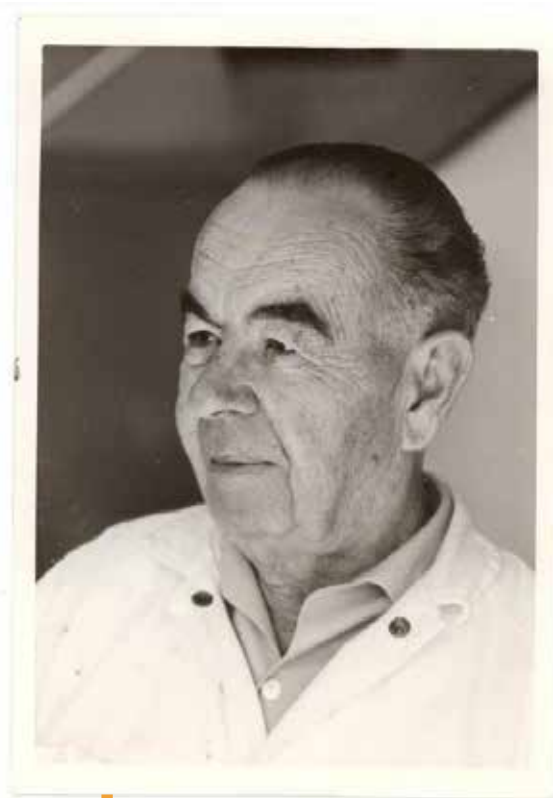
The tactics of Friends of Science in Medicine, however, appear to be working. "Our university is petrified of them," says Marc Cohen, head of the Department of Complementary Medicine at RMIT University. "They engage in letter-writing campaigns saying it's

an embarrassment that you teach chiropractic and that Chinese medicine is quackery. FSM pretty much destroyed chiropractic at Macquarie University.”

John Dwyer makes no apologies. His views on complementary medicine are withering. “The popularity of alternative medicines is a triumph of marketing, I’ll admit that,” he says, “but from a scientific, clinical point of view alternative medicine has got very little use for people to stay healthy or to help them with their health problems.

“Clearly, Blackmores is built on a solid rock of consumer sentiment – just as Marcus Blackmore wanted, but it’s not built on anything but a fairy floss approach to science.

“There have been surveys showing that many Australians are spending \$80 or more a month on supplements, and scientists all around the world have been studying modern Western populations and pointing out that the vast majority of people do not need to take vitamin supplements. The advertising claims, for example, that are made by Blackmores that they relieve stress and provide energy are simply false.”



“He always wore a jacket and tie and had **two** nurses wearing white coats with a **chain,** watch and badge.”

Marcus Blackmore doesn’t know whether to laugh or cry when told these comments. “John Dwyer has made an art form of being a critic of our industry and philosophy and he can’t afford to change,” he says.

“Dwyer would tell you there’s no evidence for traditional Chinese medicine and that reflexology is a lot of rubbish and yet just about every hospital in China has a reflexologist. To say there is no evidence for Chinese medicine is an affront to the Chinese.”

Dwyer tells *Good Weekend* he’s never taken a vitamin or mineral supplement in his life, although he acknowledges that certain people need to take them in certain situations. He cites the benefits of both vitamin D for elderly people with osteoporosis and the role of folate for pregnant women in developing a healthy foetus.

“But this wholesale marketing of supplements to Australians as something that should be part of their normal monthly routine to keep them well ... that’s just seeing us waste billions of dollars a year,” he says.

“Dwyer’s comments are unscientific,” Blackmore retorts, “and it’s a shame when people who purport to be scientists are so one-eyed they’re not prepared to open their mind to the fact that there may be other levels of science. I can tell you I was at Hamilton Island last week. I had sciatic pain down my side and I had a woman in our team give me acupuncture. One treatment. Gone.

“There’s been a hell of a lot of observation and deduction over 5000 years in China. They haven’t necessarily had a double blind gold standard cross-over trial that orthodox medicine requires of new chemical entities that have never existed on the planet before. So it’s a different approach to science. This is holistic. It involves a philosophy. It involves a way of life.

MAURICE BLACKMORE was already a pioneering figure in the world of Australian natural health when Marcus was born in 1945. Twenty-two years earlier, Blackmore Snr had arrived in Brisbane by ship from the United Kingdom looking for a healthier life. He was 17 years old and within a few years had fallen under the spell of naturopath and herbalist Frederic Roberts, the creator of Australia’s first soy foods.

By 1934, after studying naturopathy and chiropractic, Maurice Blackmore had set up “Blackmore’s Naturopathic Rest Home” in Rockhampton with a

Some of Blackmore Snr’s patients would go on to become leading naturopaths themselves, among them American marine Rex Reno, who’d been so badly injured at Pearl Harbor that he was told by doctors he had no more than three years to live. Blackmore put Reno on a 12-month regime of colloids to build up his body tissue and within a few years Reno was running his own clinic in Nambour.

“My father’s life’s work was minerals and mineral therapy,” Blackmore says. “He was cautious about vitamins and preferred to use low-dose minerals because he believed that anything that promotes blood circulation is going to be healing and that the body can only repair itself if it builds new cells. In turn, it can only build new cells if it’s got the right nutrition, hence his work on minerals.”

Marcus Blackmore’s father was a prolific writer and publisher but in 1951 he caused an outcry by publishing a booklet called *Food Remedies*, which not only promoted the nutritional and medical value of a natural diet, but also questioned the competence of the medical profession.

Doctors, politicians and the press responded by attacking naturopaths in general and questioning Maurice Blackmore’s qualifications in particular, while the Queensland Labor government introduced the Medical Acts Amendment Bill to curtail naturopathic activities. They never bargained on Maurice Blackmore’s political savvy.

“In those days in Queensland a lot of people travelled by train, particularly politicians,” his son says. “So that’s how my dad got to meet these guys.”

Not only did Maurice Blackmore have the support of Country Party politicians – and future premiers – like Frank Nicklin and Joh Bjelke-Petersen, he also had a powerful weapon in the form of testimonials from people who had found “naturopathic cures” for their ailments. He placed these endorsements in newspaper advertisements and his own health publications.

“I suffered greatly for many years from chronic constipation and all the ills that go with this kind of complaint. I saw many doctors in those years, but none ever gave me any relief. I consulted the Blackmore Clinic and in 12 months was completely cured. I think it would be disastrous to interfere with the work of the Blackmore Clinics.” There were 8000 testimonials like this. The Medical Amendments Bill was scrapped.

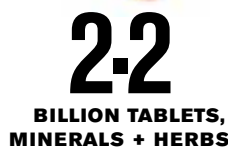
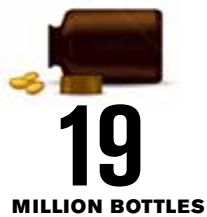
MARCUS BLACKMORE greets me at the front door of his home overlooking the glorious storm-threatened waters of Sydney’s Pittwater. Through the trees you can see his “Palm Beach 50” leisure boat moored at his private jetty, one of six boats that the champion sailor owns, in addition to the French-made “Squirrel” jet engine helicopter that he learnt to pilot at the age of 60 and now keeps parked at Sydney’s Mascot airport.

Last year he flew himself and a friend to Dubbo to attend a celebration of Johnny Cash’s music even though he doesn’t much like music because of the damage done to his ears while serving as a gunnery officer during the Vietnam War. (Blackmore is today vice chairman of the Defence Support Reserves Council.)

Last year he also invited more than 150 friends to Hamilton Island for a three-day celebration of his wedding to Caroline Furlong, his partner of 15 years. He was 68 and this was his first marriage. “Sometimes it takes a long time to make decisions, mate,” he says wryly.

Among the wedding guests were billionaire property developer Lang Walker; businessman and philanthropist Jack Smorgan; Hungry Jacks founder Jack Cowin (“I tell him to stop selling that shit and take more vitamins,” Blackmore says); Geelong Football Club President Frank Costa; Australia’s Ukrainian-born sailing coach Victor Kovalenko; Kay Cottee, the

IN ONE YEAR



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MILLION TABLETS
A DAY

consultation and treatment room and space for three live-in patients. By the end of World War II he was married to Marcus’s mother Edna, operating part-time naturopathic clinics throughout Queensland, and producing a range of mineral-based products in the belief that mineral deficiency was the cause of most ailments.

“He always wore a jacket and tie and had two nurses wearing white coats with a chain, watch and badge,” his son says. “You would swear you were walking into the Mayo Clinic.”

**HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS:**

(from left) Marcus Blackmore's son Alexander Borromeo, Blackmore, his wife Caroline and her daughter Imogen Merrony. (opposite page) Blackmore's father Maurice.

first woman to circumnavigate the world non-stop; Speaker of the House of Representatives Bronwyn Bishop and Petrea King, founding director and chief executive of the Quest for Life Foundation. The Reverend Bill Crews from the Exodus Foundation performed the ceremony in a chapel by Catseye Beach.

Among the guests was also Alexander (Aly) Borromeo, the long-time former captain of the Philippines national football team, who had only met his father Marcus Blackmore for the first time two years earlier.

"Aly was born in the US," says Blackmore. "His [Filipino] mother and I made a decision that he would be brought up in the Philippines. I didn't contact him till he was 27 and then his mother said to me one day, 'It's time you met your son.' I was on tenterhooks but I went to the Philippines and I have to say that you couldn't wish for a son who was as good-looking, respectful or as engaging to Caroline and Immy [Imogen Merrony, Caroline's daughter] as Aly.

"We had lunch together and I was more nervous than he was. I didn't say, 'Hello son,' I don't know what I said, but he made me feel at home."

Marcus Blackmore wanted to be a ferryman when he was young, such was his love of the water. Today he possesses the riches of Solomon through his nutraceutical empire [profits of \$25 million on an annual turnover of \$325 million last year] but his network of friends is testament to something far more enduring than mere business prowess.

"He is singularly the most generous person I have ever known," says Sydney naturopath Rita Cozzi. "He doesn't just donate money like a lot of [rich] people," agrees Kay Cottee, "he puts inordinate amounts of time into people and causes.

"He was absolutely crucial to my trip," Cottee says of her historic 189-day solo voyage aboard Blackmores First Lady in 1988. "He wasn't thinking seriously of sponsoring me until he became a bit concerned about the safety aspects. I shudder to think what the final bill was but he is constantly doing things like that."

Blackmore is also revered as an honorary chief in Samoa. "He provided the largest amount of money to help schools that were damaged [in the 2009 tsunami]," says his Samoan-born employee of nearly 26 years, Pito Hatherly. "Whenever he arrives now they're all waiting to honour him with a kava ceremony."

His list of causes runs like a one-man humanitarian

relief mission. Samoan disaster assistance. The Heart Research Institute. Bill Crews' Exodus Foundation. The Bilgola Beach Surf Club. Petrea King's Quest for Life Foundation. He has friends in low places and high.

"After I had a lung removed for cancer," says John Fahey, former NSW premier and finance minister in the Howard government, "Marcus said to me over a glass of wine one night in Parliament House: 'You've got to go and see Petrea King.' I'd never heard of her before but Marcus insisted I see her ... and later I felt a whole lot better about myself."

Known nationally for her work with people facing grief, loss and trauma, Petrea King says there's no one quite like Blackmore in Australia. "If there's a high-profile person in this country who is depressed, suicidal, dealing with some unexpected challenge, dealing with some tragic event, dealing with an illness, Marcus is always on the phone saying, 'Will you speak to this person?' He is clearly a very astute businessman but he has a heart every bit as big as his business skills. And for me that says a lot about his visionary leadership."

Blackmore's company headquarters on Sydney's northern beaches is also a testament to that leadership – a sustainable building of low-energy lighting systems, temperature-sensitive windows, a low carbon footprint gas-fired generation plant, a garden of medicinal herbs and a "Wellness Centre" that incorporates treatment rooms, a yoga and pilates studio, a gym and a 20-metre lap pool.

BLACKMORE WILL NEED all his considerable energy and "visionary" leadership in the coming years as his industry squares off against John Dwyer's Friends of Science in Medicine. A few weeks ago Dwyer appeared before the Health Care

Complaints Commission's inquiry into "false or misleading health-related information or practices."

His submission was unambiguous: FSM wanted stronger regulations for "purveyors of alternative medicine" and a clearly defined and enforceable code of conduct whereby practitioners were held responsible and accountable for advice they provided.

Dwyer took aim at homoeopaths, naturopaths, chiropractors, osteopaths, kinesiologists, anti-vaccination organisations, colonic irrigation services, home births, and esoteric breast massage as examples of individuals and organisations providing "non-science-based" information or intervention.

This infuriates not just Blackmore but experts in the field of complementary medicine like RMIT University's Marc Cohen who accuse Dwyer of employing "the straw man" argument. "He targets crystal therapy or reiki, the fringe of complementary medicine, and he shoots that down as being unscientific and tries to tar all of complementary medicine with the same brush.

"Obviously there are really flaky people in natural medicine but that's what they [FSM] focus on. Mind you, if they put the mirror up to western medicine it's orders of magnitude greater in terms of damage done. How many people die from the known and proper use of pharmaceuticals? Doctor-caused [iatrogenic] disease varies between the top two and top three causes of death in the United States and we are talking hundreds of thousands of people."

Blackmore agrees. "You've got to remember that the medical profession is a very slow adopter of things. Ignaz Semmelweis, the German obstetrician, was the first guy to wash his hands when delivering babies. It's a great parallel for our business because the death rate in Semmelweis's hospital was much lower than any other hospital but Semmelweis was so persecuted that he ended up in an institution."

Professor Lesley Braun, Marc Cohen's co-author of the best-selling text book *Herbs & Natural Supplements* says it's patently wrong to suggest there is no "biological plausibility" or "evidence" for how nutritional and herbal medicines work. She reels off the latest research: randomised controlled trials on fish oil for rheumatoid arthritis; a meta analysis behind coenzyme q10 and hyper tension; a meta analysis behind St John's wort and depression; a randomised controlled trial behind the herb caladonian and bronchitis; a randomised controlled trial behind saffron and depression.

She says that given the widespread use of complementary medicine it was now incumbent for doctors to understand it better and to look at the plethora of studies that had been done.

"We know that a lot of pharmaceutical medicines used long term actually have an effect on the nutritional status of the body so we've got this new thing that never arose in previous generations – interactions between pharmaceutical medicine and nutrients."

Marcus Blackmore is a genial man with more friends than most people could collect in three lifetimes. His blood boils over, however, with Dwyer's attempts to tarnish an industry that he, Blackmore, believes is built on a paradigm of wellness as opposed to illness. And he's ready for the fight that's coming.

"It's fair to say that I have strong political connections and this was ingrained in me by my father, because if it wasn't for those strong political connections there wouldn't be any naturopaths in Australia." ■