

## OBITUARIES

# A world authority on metrication

**PATRICK THOMAS NAUGHTIN**  
EDUCATOR, METRICS EXPERT  
27-10-1946 — 16-7-2011

By **GUY Le COUTEUR**

PAT Naughtin, a science teacher and later CSIRO educator and communicator who became a world authority on metrication, has died of cancer at St John of God Hospital in Geelong.

Such was the expertise Naughtin built up on metrication that the United States National Institute of Standards and Technology described him as "the leading expert on the subject in the world". He gave speeches to the institute, as well as to Google and other bodies around the world.

In 2007, the BBC reported Naughtin's discovery, through his original research, that John Wilkins, the first secretary of the Royal Society, had developed modern metric principles in a book published in 1668. This was more than a century before the system was adopted in France.

Perhaps in some way this connection with figures contributed to making him a steadfast opponent of ageism, and he maintained that his age at death was irrelevant.

The second in a family of seven children and the son of a policeman, he was born in Coburg and grew up in towns across western Victoria.

His commute to Forrest State School involved riding a retired racehorse, Treble Bob, from the police paddock while droving eight milking cows to their day pasture on the way. Other children who rode to school had only ponies and no cows.

In 1963, Naughtin was awarded a scholarship to Longerenong Agricultural College, and later he worked for Cresco Fertilizers Ltd, installing and maintaining bulk equipment.

He obtained educational qualifications at the Hawthorn Institute of Education (now part of Melbourne University), and started teaching at Preston Technical College in 1969. From 1972 to '78, he was the college's head of biology and environmental science, and created new courses and expanded the department from 30 students and a staff of one, to 250 biology and 130 environmental science students and a staff of six.

In the 1980s, Naughtin headed science departments at technical schools in Traralgon and Portland, and from 1987 to 1990 he operated the CSIRO



Science Education Centre, as well as teaching eight half-day classes a week and running seminars. He also wrote and published the centre's publicity and liaised at all levels within the CSIRO, Victorian universities, and Ministry of Education.

Naughtin organised the CSIRO Double Helix Club in Victoria, offering monthly events to 20,000 members and giving thousands of children the opportunity to meet scientists at work. He curated and produced interactive displays for the CSIRO, reaching thousands of people at the Royal Melbourne Show and the Melbourne Music Show.

And, in 1988, he delivered a presentation to 2500 people at

the Australia and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science (ANZAAS) Science and Technology Festival.

For nine years from 1990, Naughtin was communication manager at CSIRO Textile and Fibre Technology, based in Geelong. Then he became a self-employed writer, speaker, editor, and publisher. He wrote a number of technical, educational and biographical books and manuals, and edited the measurement section of the Australian government's sixth edition of *Style manual: For authors, editors and printers*.

Having realised that the world loses billions of dollars annually and lives are endangered due to conversion errors between measurement systems, Naughtin set up a website and newsletter, *Metrication Matters*, to promote complete global adoption of the metric system.

As part of his research, Naughtin visited the library at Trinity College in Dublin and asked to view a first edition of 16th-century mathematician Simon Stevin's book *Disme; The Art of Tenths (De Thiende)*. The book arrived in a box and Naughtin, wearing the obligatory cotton gloves, removed it

reverently. But the cover fell off.

Aghast, Naughtin called for the head librarian, apologised profusely and was told, "Ah, not to be worrying, it hasn't been asked for in 200 years".

Generous with his time, he volunteered with Vision Australia's radio station RPH in Geelong, and his work in Rotary was recognised when he was named a Paul Harris fellow. He was also "Mr Metrication" on Trevor Chappell's program on ABC local radio.

For years, Naughtin promoted Belmont Rotary Club's bowel scan cancer screening program, but never took part himself. By the time his own bowel cancer was detected, he had also developed cancers in his liver, lung, prostate and thyroid.

He spent much of the remaining 15 months of his life campaigning in local media, urging everyone to take a simple, non-invasive test for bowel cancer (the second largest cause of cancer deaths in Australia) and not to be, as he described himself, "a bloody idiot" who thought he was "bulletproof".

He is survived by his wife Wendy Pomroy, stepson Guy Le Couteur, grandchildren Esther and Sylvie, and six siblings.