



Les Powell

Born in Newtown in 1921, Les spent virtually all of his working life at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, except for a brief period as an apprentice pastrycook immediately after leaving school. He began at the hospital as a messenger boy, and retired as the Deputy Manager of Supply Services in 1985 - 48 years later. He held positions at both State and Federal levels in the Health and Research Employees' Association (receiving life membership in 1980) as well as working in honorary capacities in various local community organisations. He lives with his wife at Bensville on the central coast of NSW.

I was born in 1921 in Enmore Road, Newtown. My Dad was on the tramways then as a conductor. Mum was a housewife - she was English and nursed my father in England for nearly eighteen months after the war, till he was well enough to travel home. When he got back home all the jobs were gone. He bought an old truck and tried to make a living at that, but he didn't do any good. He eventually got a job on the trams and worked on them all his life. He became a tram driver after many years, then when he got ill they put him on shed duty, working in the Waverley Depot doing a bit of cleaning and looking after their amenities room and so on. It was considered a promotion to become a driver because in those days the trams all had running boards down the side, and I can recall my Dad with chillblains on his hands. He'd have gloves with the fingers cut off so he could pull the tickets, and he used to wear two or three pairs of old socks with the feet cut out of them over his knees because they used to have to lean against the cold steel of the tram in all kinds of weather. It was a dreadful job. He died at 56. He went to Melbourne to visit some friends and he died down there. My brother and I had to go down there and arrange to bring him home, and we had to agree to a post-mortem down there because you couldn't take bodies interstate without a post-mortem if they were going to be cremated. So that was a pretty expensive

exercise, and not very pleasant for my brother and I.

I left school after I got my Intermediate Certificate - that was Third Year in those days. I left at age fourteen because Dad was working only every second weekend, and my brother was working in a dye factory, which wasn't a very pleasant job for him. Dad's youngest brother Uncle Bill had a garage on the corner of Summer and Peisley Streets in Orange right at the railway line, and he asked me to go up there. My aunt died very young and left three children - two boys and a girl - and my grandmother was raising them. Uncle Bill was still young enough to get married again, and he was courting a young lady in Sydney. He had his own aeroplane - it was the first one in Orange. Kids had never seen one on the ground before, and because I was the nephew I was patrolling around, and I was the king of the castle. I'd tell them a few lies about it and one thing and another. It was an Avro Avian. (Uncle Bill had a daughter to his second wife and he named her Avian).

It was quite a nice little biplane, and he used to come to Sydney every weekend to court this woman who eventually became my Aunty Kath - she's still alive. I used to fly down to Sydney with him. I was like Biggles - he bought me a helmet and scarf and all that and we'd fly down each weekend. He'd leave me at Mascot and I'd get a tram home to Newtown and spend the weekend with Mum and Dad and meet him again about four o'clock on the Sunday afternoon and we'd fly back to Orange again. It was pretty big time for me then.

The plane had folding wings, and he was out at the aerodrome one day unfolding them, trying to get the holding pins in place, when a gust of wind came. He tried to hold the whole plane from tipping over and buggered up his back. He was in plaster and harness for nearly twelve months, so I stopped on at the garage and helped him. It was a 24-hour service, and I used to sleep in the office. People would blow their horn and I'd have to go out and serve them. The pumps weren't electric like they are now, and I used to have to put an old towel over the pump handle because it was so cold your hand would freeze to it in the winter. If a farmer brought in a 44 gallon drum to be filled it took a while to do that way!

After he got a bit better my mother wrote to me to tell me that a neighbour had a position for me. It was with a pastrycook at Kings Cross, with a Swiss fellow who'd won prizes for sponges, and cake decoration - he was a real top class pastrycook. I worked there for over twelve months. It was six days a week. I used to start at six in the morning. I'd ride a bike to Kings Cross and finish about five thirty or six at night and then ride home again. When I got home on the Saturday all my mates would be out - they'd leave a message with Mum where they were going and I'd catch up with them. After about twelve months Mum and Dad wanted me to have a holiday with them, but the pastrycook said that he didn't observe public holidays or anything like that, and wouldn't let me go. So one day I was at work and this Mr Huber came up to me and told me that my mother had come to collect me, and that I was leaving that job.

In those days I had mates who were apprentices who were getting eleven shillings a week and I was getting thirty nine shillings a week. It was good money for those days, but I was working six days for nearly twelve hours a day. And he was good to me - I got meals and that, and he'd even take us out on picnics. He had an old Chev roadster and he and his wife would sit in the front and another girl that worked for him and I would sit in the dickie seat at the back. He looked after us that way, but Mum felt that I was being exploited by him and took me away.

I was out of work for a few weeks, and I went for several jobs. I went for a messenger's job when they built The Trocadero in George Street. A bloke called James Bendroit was the fellow that started it, and he wanted a messenger. Over thirty kids applied, and he ruled them out if they lived further out than Petersham. He got down to two of us, and flipped a coin, and the other chap got it. He eventually became the manager of Bendroit's restaurant in Martin Place called Prince's. I used to drop in there and see him for years afterwards. Bendroit offered me a job on his farm on the Castlereagh out from Penrith looking after horses and that, but it was a live-in job and Mum didn't like the sound of that. So after that I applied for a job as messenger at Prince Alfred Hospital, and that's what started me there. I was there for the rest of my working life - forty eight years.

I was a town messenger and I used to have one of those big gladstone bags - you could nearly put a body in it, you know. I used to have to get the tram into town. I'd get out at the Railway and do calls all through. I'd deliver the minutes of the Board Meetings to them in Macquarie Street, then I'd be down to Sussex Street - I'd walk miles every day. Sometimes when I'd get back I could hardly walk, with this great big bag full of things. I'd go to Elliott Brothers and Australian Drug and pick up winchesters of chemicals and so on - all on public transport.

One day I got back and I was just about buggered. It was a stinking hot day, and I used to have to wear a blue coat with a celluloid collar. (I got rid of that after a while!) This day the General Superintendent, Dr Alan Lilley, who later became the first chairman of the Health Commission, saw me stagger through the front door and he called me into his office. "Take everything out of the bag," he said, "spread everything out on my desk." There were two big winchesters amongst all the stuff - they were like a big bottle with a seal at the top and they hold about six pints. Elliott Brothers were in Bridge Street near O'Connell Street at the time, and the bloke there used to do these winchesters up in a sugar bag with a bit of rope around the top to make it easy for me to carry. He was a real good man who knew all the delivery kids by their christian name. At Christmas time he'd have a present for them all. Anyway, the General Superintendent went through all the stuff in the bag and asked me where each item came from, then he called all the people involved into his office and said to them: "You see all this gear here? Well, Les has carried all this around town." Then he told the Matron that the books she'd given me to deliver weren't my problem, and he told others to send stuff in with their own messenger boys. Then he sent a circular around to all concerned saying that I wasn't just a pack horse, that I was there for urgent jobs and so on, and I wasn't to have to carry all this gear. I wasn't very popular for a time because a lot of people seemed to think that I had dobbed them in, which of course I hadn't. But it all sorted itself out, and for years after that, even after he'd retired, whenever he came to the hospital he'd always come to my department and sit down and have a talk. We became quite good friends - and he was the top health man in the State before he retired.

So that was the early stages. Then I transferred to the Stores Department, doing deliveries around the wards and that sort of thing. Every second week was a seven day week job. I'd work until lunchtime Saturdays and lunch time Sundays. We used to have a dairy herd out at the Dame Edith Walker Home out at Concord and we used to bring in milk from there in bulk. They didn't produce enough to satisfy the hospital's needs, and we'd get more from Dairy Farmers. We used to have to decant the milk from ten gallon cans into smaller sized cans for the various wards and so on. That was quite a big job. We'd have to bring the cans back and wash them in a detergent, then pass them over a steam jet and

put them on racks to dry.

When I first went there, on Saturday mornings I'd take supplies up to the doctors' quarters and so on. There were no refrigerators in the wards in those days and I'd have to go down and chip or saw these great big blocks of ice up, put them on a steel tray and then on to a four wheeled vehicle and drag them around and carry them up and down the stairs and put them in the ice chests. Then I'd deliver all the printing and stationery they needed - clinical forms and all that to all the various wards. That was my Saturday morning - I was supposed to do that between seven and twelve.

There was another job I had to do every morning when I was a messenger - I had to clean all the doctors' shoes and boots - football boots, cricket boots and everything. They'd leave them outside the door and I used to go and collect them and clean them all up. People have said to me that that was dreadful, and that they wouldn't do it, but I had no choice - I had to do it to keep my job. But that was the job, and they looked after me. They were very pleasant to me. But then once I transferred to the Store full-time that finished, and I just used to do deliveries, pack things up for the departments and so on.

And so I just graduated through the Stores system till I retired as Deputy Manager of Supply Services, where I was responsible for many staff. We covered pots and pans, cleaning materials, linen, mattresses, furniture, pharmaceuticals, food supplies, and internal transport around the hospital. (They had those little electric trolley things.) Also, in later years, we took over the Sterile Supplies as well. I was responsible for rostering, for annual leave and all the administrative stuff for a large staff of around 190 people.

Over the time I was there I did various other jobs. Occasionally I'd work on night duty in the Emergency Department. I saw all sorts of dreadful things there. I saw a chap come in with a rail from a bridge through his chest. We'd have to take the bodies down to the mortuary and pack ice round them - this was all before refrigeration. I didn't like that at all. I was only young, and they used to try it on all the young fellows. Whoever was doing the job would fill the bottom shelves up first. I had to take a body down there one time, and the bottom shelves were all full and I had to get him onto a shelf higher up. He was quite a heavy fellow, and every time I'd get his feet up his head would come down and vice versa, you know. I'd have to grab someone walking past to give me a hand. Then you'd have to get ice from the ice chamber and pack ice on them and that. So the times in the Emergency Department weren't very pleasant.

When war broke out there was a unit made up with the people from Pathology and some of the doctors I knew, but for some strange reason I was manpowered, and couldn't go. They kept me there. It worried me that I couldn't go - particularly now, on Remembrance Day when I think of my father... and I lost one particularly good friend. (My eldest son's named after him).

During the war we had Americans working with us. They had two or three wards at the hospital. I worked with American soldiers, and got quite friendly with them. But I felt quite out of it all, especially since just about all my other mates had gone. They took other people from the hospital, and they didn't reject me on physical grounds. Maybe it was because I'd had such diverse work at the hospital that I knew everything that was going on.

I could just about do anything. I used to handle surgical instruments, and help

with the sharpening of scalpels. In those days they sharpened the scalpels - they weren't disposable. We'd sharpen them up with oil stones - you'd use about four different grades of stone. And we'd take the scissors apart and do the same with them. But of course later on they all became disposable - these days they just clip a new scalpel blade onto a handle. We had a Mr Booth there who was the chief instrument attendant who taught us how to do all this. He was a real nice man - he had a son who was a radiologist. In those days they had men handling the instruments in the theatres. They'd be told what type of operation it was going to be, and they'd have to get out all the standard instruments for that operation, and they'd attend the operation. As men like Mr Booth retired gradually the theatre sisters came into it, and by the time I retired there were no men used in the theatres at all - except for cleaning up and sterilising and all that. The men had always done that part of it - it was always considered a dirty job, too dirty for the nursing staff. And over the years the nurses became more qualified, and they ended up taking charge of the theatres and everything.

Anyhow, I saw the war out. Then the Korean war started later on, and Dr Thomson (who'd taken the medical unit away to the second world war) was asked to form a general hospital unit prepared to go to Korea, and he asked me would I like to be Quartermaster Captain. I was duly commissioned, and with a lot of friends from the hospital we formed the general hospital unit with half a dozen top doctors, surgeons and anaesthetists. After being kept home from the war before by the manpower, that made me feel a little bit better, but nothing came of it in the end. We went away several times and did a lot of training, but we never got to Korea. The unit stayed formed though, and I was in it for about five years, I suppose. The older fellows started to pull out of it - though it could still be going for all I know.

So after that I just progressed through the Stores Department. A New Zealand fellow named Mr Meads was the Stores Manager, and when he passed on they replaced him with an accountant, and I became his assistant. Because I knew more than he did I got quite a substantial pay increase till he got to know the ropes. But we were really good friends as a matter of fact. He died seven years ago and my wife Jean and I went up to visit his wife at Newcastle the other day. We were always good mates.

Computers were starting to come in then, and they brought a fellow in named John Cremen. He was known as Mick Cremen, a Rugby Union International who played five-eighth for Australia, and he and I hit it off straight away. He was appointed the Manager for Supply Services and I was appointed Deputy Manager. By this time I was about fifty, and that's where I stayed for the rest of my working life.

I was always interested in industrial affairs. I was a State and Federal Councillor for the Health and Research Employees' Association. I eventually got Life Membership for the work I did with them. It made it quite awkward at times - when the men would expect me to do this, that and the other for them and I'd do what I could. I'd go to court and argue their cases for them. A friend and I had to go in to court to give evidence for a work value case. This was when computers were starting to get going and they asked me all the questions in the world about computers, many of which I didn't know, but Mick Cremen said: "Oh, well. Les is pretty bright. He'll soon pick that up," and more or less took responsibility for us. The other fellow and myself got seventy five dollars a week rise out of it! Then it

followed all down the line. The senior storeman got about thirty dollars and so on down. It was retrospective for six months. I was in all of the big things as far as the Health and Research Employees' Association was concerned. And then we amalgamated with all the other states and became a federal body, and it became a fairly strong union. I stayed on as an advisor till I left.

There was a union at the hospital when I started there. It was called the Hospitals, Homes and Laboratories Association then, and the dues were sixpence a week. I don't remember them doing much for us, but we did get ten bob a week once. I remember my Dad, when I first started there, saying: "Well, they'll have a union there Leslie," (Dad was a very keen ALP man and was in the Newtown branch of the ALP.) He said: "As soon as you get to the hospital you look up the union man," which I did. I wasn't really entitled to be in it because you had to be eighteen, but I joined anyway. The union man used to come around every week at the bundy and collect everybody's sixpences. Then I was Branch Secretary, then Branch President, then I was elected to the State Council, then the Federal Council when it became a federal body. I got my Life Membership in the early 1980s. Only five a year are handed out. We had a big day at the AJC at Randwick Racecourse and Neville Wran presented that to me. Jean came down with me and they put us in a motel for the night. I thought it was nice.

When I first went to Prince Alfred they had an Adjusted Daily Average of occupied beds of over 1400. It's down to five hundred now. Half the wards are closed. We had a staff of over four thousand. All the nurses had to live in. They couldn't live out and come in at nine o'clock in the morning. If they had a day off they had to report to the matron so the matron could scrutinise them before they went out, because they had to be acceptably dressed and couldn't have lipstick on - though as soon as they got out of the matron's office out'd come the lipstick! And they had to have a leave pass. They had to be back in the nurses' home by eleven PM of a night. It was dreadful! Like the army! They were really regimented, you know. They were terrified of the matron and the senior sisters and that. Matron Lawrie was an ex-army major or something in the Nursing Corps. She carried on after the war, but she was still a major. Then she left and we got another one - Matron Hetherington - she was a real gentle lady and after she came things started to change. The sisters did away with those stiff cotton veil things and they started to dress a bit modern. The senior sisters would just wear a dress with a white coat with their identification on it. So things changed a lot after that.

There were big changes after the Sterile Supplies Department came in. Each ward used to have their own little steam steriliser, and when the central sterilising came in things changed altogether. They'd just get these packs, pre-packed with forceps and scissors and so on, dressing packs and all that sort of thing. As part of my job in the Supply Department I was on the Choice of Disposables Committee. This was a Committee where the Medical Superintendent of the hospital and the heads of the different groups - medical, surgical, theatre - they'd be on the Committee, and I had to present these disposables to them. They used to have a meeting once a month, and they'd say: "Well next month we want to have a look at such and such - a disposable needle or an intravenous cannula - we're not happy with the ones we're using" and it was my job to get all the samples in from the different companies, price them, compare the prices with the ones then in use, and they would decide what was going to be used. Then I'd have to fix it all up. That was quite interesting, and I got to know some of the quite senior people personally then.

But as a result of all this, all the samples that I used to get in for the Committee would accumulate in my department. I used to ring people who I thought might be able to use them. The first thing I thought of was the Aboriginal Medical Service in Redfern. I phoned them up and told them exactly what I had, and said they were theirs if they wanted them. 'Oh, yes, we'd be glad of them. When can you deliver them?'"! Not "We'll come and get them" or anything! Then they asked me if I had any of this and that, and I explained that I only had what I'd listed and explained again how I came to have them to give away. The next thing the Superintendent (Dr Childs) calls me over to his office, and he's got a letter from the Aboriginal Medical Service saying that one of his employees was a racist! It was me! Because I didn't have some of the things that they thought they should have! After that I didn't bother with them, and I used to get on to the Pacific Missions and they came and took them. They even wanted old broken scissors and forceps to repair and use. They couldn't get them quick enough.

Another time I had eighty stainless steel beds. I had new castors put on them, I had them all cleaned up - steam cleaned - and I had eighty inner spring mattresses to go with them that had been autoclaved and with new slip-on covers put on them. I offered them to the Sydney City Mission and they said they couldn't take them! I had the opportunity to do that, and I used to try and do the right thing. Once the hospital has knocked them back the firms don't want them back, and I accumulated quite a lot of stuff that way. So I'd give it to the Missions or whoever wanted it, depending what it was.

Then we had a Furniture Department that became a Used Furniture Department. We used to advertise the different things available there and people would come to have a look at it. It was a full business where we used to try and dispose of stuff that was of no further use to the hospital. Suppliers used to send their reps in to see me. I had a Purchasing Officer in my Department and most of the business went through him.

We used to have to get quotes, too. I used to put in what they called an Annual Indent Order. I had to estimate what we wanted in standard things like, say, Kleenex tissues, toilet rolls, standard surgical things, syringes, needles - all that sort of stuff, and I'd have to prepare this Annual Indent Order. Then the Purchasing Officer would get the quotes in, and on the basis of that we'd place the orders. They were "on call" orders. You'd give them the overall order, but we'd ring up and get a thousand of this and a thousand of that as we wanted them. That was a big job. And the annual stocktake was murder. This was all basically my responsibility, even though John Cremen was the Manager of the Supply Department. But he was remote, his office was over with the hierarchy over the other side of the grounds and sometimes I wouldn't see him for a week or a fortnight at a time - unless something went wrong. We had quite a good working relationship between us. I got on very well with him.

As the years went by we bought more and more disposable items. In earlier times we used to buy a syringe where you could buy spare parts for it. It was just a glass barrel, and you could buy the nozzle and the plunger and all that separately. It sounded good, but it just wasn't practical in the finish when it became all disposables. And catheters. (I had the unfortunate experience of being in the North Gosford Hospital for a prostate operation and I was in agony because I had a catheter in for three days that hadn't been changed. I went down to a head sister and she told me that the catheters were very expensive. I said: "Look. Don't tell me about it. I used to buy them by the thousand. You mean Foley's ureteric balloon catheters? I know that they're not that expensive that I

have to be in agony.” Eventually they sent a nurse up to change it.)

I knew most of the hospital by the time I left, but the Prince Alfred complex was spread over something like ninety acres, and you could spend a day just going around it. For instance, my office was off Missenden Road - Salisbury Road at the finish - and our Sterile Supplies Department was half a mile away! You had to go through corridors, and zig zag all the way down and everything like that.

I’m not boasting, but people used to come to me, and they’d say...”Les Powell will know.” And when I retired I got a nice write-up in the Newsletter they used to put out. There was a photo of Jean and I, and “Les Powell retires after 48 years” and a little bit about my history. And I got nice letters from the Association, and a nice letter from the Superintendent. They always used to have a bit party for people that left and I didn’t want that - I just wanted to get out. The Superintendent’s letter asked me to go in and have a yarn and afternoon tea with him. I phoned him up. But I’ve kept all those letters.

I’ve been back a couple of times since I retired, but it’s all changed. Dr Don Childs had left, (who was a thorough gentleman) and they had a fellow there instead who wasn’t too popular, from what I could gather. I’ve been retired for ten years now. I actually finished work in 1984 but I had twelve months long service leave and John Cremen advised me to take the leave and keep my options open in case I wanted to come back after twelve months. So I was on full pay for twelve months. We did a bit of travelling. I’ve got a son who’s with UNICEF in Nepal. We went over to see him for five weeks via Singapore and Thailand. Coming back we went into China and Hong Kong. While we were with my son we saw a bit of Kashmir, and we flew over Everest one day. We went down into a jungle camp and saw wild rhinos. He’s been there for twenty years now. He’s married to a Belgian girl who’s with UNICEF as well. He designs their greeting cards and they make handmade paper products obtained from the Tibetan villagers up in the mountains. They make it from the rhododendron bush. Quite nice things. But we didn’t go too far while we were in Nepal because I’ve had five hip replacements - three one side and two the other, plus a dislocation, so that slowed me up. It was the main reason that I retired, actually - I retired early.

You always got the occasional one that was a bit high and mighty of course, but as far as the medical staff goes, the good doctors were good blokes. One fellow, Geoff Macdonald, you could not have met a more decent bloke. He was in this army unit with me, and he was a consultant to specialists - on the medical side, not surgical. He was a brilliant man and you could talk to Geoff like I’m talking to you. Another fellow I knew was the Chief Anaesthetist, Bill Shaw - he died young. But all the good doctors were good fellows - ear, nose and throat specialists and all that sort of thing. But there were always a few who thought they were good who weren’t so pleasant. You’d get doctors who followed their rosters exactly, and others who would do more than they really had. Only a few would follow up a public patient the same as they would one of their private patients.

One that sticks in my mind was called The Cowboy (I can’t remember his name now). He’d come in sometimes of a Saturday night with his riding boots on and a big silver buckle and cowboy hat on, and full as a boot - to check up on his patients. Otherwise he was always spick and span, and didn’t mind doing a bit more than the minimum. A real gentleman.
We used to socialise with the nursing staff - we’d have christmas parties and so

on, and they were all pretty good. In the later years things weren't as stiff as they were when I first went there. In the early days they treated the medical staff like gods. People still do, I think.

In the later years things began to change around when the higher administration in the state health service started to change. They opened a Glebe Community Health Centre. They had a doctor in charge there who's now with the Health Department and nobody could really hit it off with her. There were a lot of arguments with her.

Then they started a Home Dialysis Unit. That was another one that I had to set up. The patients were trained to put the cannulas in and all that sort of thing and hook themselves up to a renal dialysis machine. I had to arrange for supplies to be delivered to their home. They'd submit an order to me, approved by their doctor, for needles and bandages and all sorts of things. It was my job to get one of my blokes to pack these things up and then have it delivered to them. There was a lot of trouble with those people - the patients themselves. They got very aggressive - apparently it goes with the complaint, and you can understand it, too, when they're on a dialysis machine three or four days a week. They'd get very aggressive if things weren't there right on time, but they were just little hassles that went.

But as I was saying, the whole administration changed. I suppose this would have started around the mid-seventies. They got a Commercial Director in and before long he had a big staff around him and they had flash offices. They got very remote, and he didn't make things any happier. It got top heavy in administration. For instance, the Chief Engineer, he was in charge of all the maintenance services and had a big staff - plumbing, fitting and turning, painters, motor mechanics and all. He was taken out of his job where he worked in the department and on the job, and taken over to the administration with all the other hierarchy. Luckily I stayed where I was, but John Cremen, being head of the department, he spent most of his time over there. The atmosphere changed, and it seemed to be that the people that you least expected to get positions of power got them. We had a doctor who was very nice when she was in the hospital. She became the Medical Superintendent, and once she got in things changed. For instance, her whole attitude on the Choice of Disposables Committee - she made it unpleasant, where all of those before her were easy to get on with. I hated her guts. When I left they were too top heavy to be really efficient. And they were top-heavy on salaries - there was just that many of them. They all built their own little empires.

Before long the new superintendent had a new motor car supplied by the hospital, and you could see things starting to happen that shouldn't have happened. We used to have a really good social club there. We used to run an annual ball and we had a football team and a cricket team. When we took over the Dame Edith Walker Hospital in Concord - (that was just a hospital where people could go to recuperate after they'd been in Prince Alfred and had an operation). It was a lovely set-up. It had a swimming pool and all. The fellow who lived there and was the House Steward of the hospital had a cricket pitch laid down and we used to play other hospitals and firms like J. M. Kirby Pty Ltd, which was a big engineering place near the hospital. We used to have wonderful days up there. They'd pick us up in a truck along the way - they put seats in the back of a big truck and our wives and kids would come and it would be a real social day. Well all those things went.

I made lifelong friends from those days. We still go out with my mate around

here who was my Purchasing Officer. This Dr Edgar Thomson I was telling you about - the colonel in charge of that army unit, he was a really good friend of mine. He was the Chief Pathologist, and when Dr Alan B. Lilley left he was given the Superintendent's job, and he really got stuck into things. Because he'd been head of the Pathology Dept he knew what was going on around the departments and he really started to clean things up.

One time there, sometime around the mid-seventies, I suppose, I found that I had been omitted from the application by our Association for a new award. There were blokes below me who were getting the same sort of money as me, so I phoned Dr Thomson about it, and he said he didn't know if he could do anything about it. I didn't say any more, I just put in my resignation. I was serious about it, too, because I could have lined a job up through friends in the Association and that - they'd have found something for me. Dr Thomson called me in and wanted to know what the resignation was all about, and I explained the situation to him. He said to leave it with him, and about one o'clock on the Friday he said to me: "I want you in my office, Les." so I went over, and he had a big grin on his face and we shook hands and he said: "I've fixed all that up. You'll get it all, retrospective, and about sixty bucks a week. Are you going to stop whingeing now?" (*Laughs*). But he was a good bloke. He was a real friend. He died of cancer, and as a matter of fact I saw him five minutes before he died. I went up to see him in hospital, when he was very bad towards the end. We shook hands and he gave me a bit of a smile, and he was dead five minutes later.

I've made some good friends. There's another bloke here on the central coast who's an ear, nose and throat specialist - he was the ENT Registrar at Prince Alfred and he came to me and said: "I'm going into a practice on the central coast. I haven't got a cracker. Every cent I've got has gone into the practice. I've got no instruments. Have you got any old broken instruments I can repair or anything?" I gave him a box full of old things we used to keep for spare parts - ophthalmoscopes, otoscopes and things. Anyhow, he was as pleased as punch. I see him now and again at the Leagues Club. He's big time now and you have to wait about three months to see him. Anyhow, they're just some of the people that have passed through my life - friends I had that were really good friends, you know.

It was a satisfying job in that the work you were doing was helping people - only in a remote way, of course - I never came in contact with patients unless it was a personal friend or something. Under certain circumstances I'd stay back late and all that. And of course we had our emergencies - like the time there was a plane buzzing around Mascot for about three hours unloading petrol. The undercarriage wouldn't come down and I had to pack all the emergency boxes. I had these emergency boxes where I had to replenish any of the stuff that could deteriorate and so on. I had the boxes specially made to the size we wanted. Many a time I had to get those packed in a hurry for a fire or something.

When the Vietnam War was on we had a surgical unit over there, and it was my job to send them their supplies. It was funded by the Health Department and I had to pack up their stuff and send it to Richmond aerodrome where they'd put it on a plane and send it to Vietnam. I got some lovely letters from the doctor in charge over there, because I always used to put a few extras in. I'd go round the food stores and scrounge a few extra things for them.

After I left, all the positions in my department and other departments were declared vacant, and the people already in those jobs had to reapply for them. This was one way of weeding out the numbers, because at one stage there you had to murder someone before they could get rid of you. I made a couple of mistakes on that score. I signed on a wild Irishman and the trouble he caused that place you've got no idea!

Although all the stores were on computers, I only used them when I needed information. Some people there were sitting at them all day and never left them. Prior to computers we had them all on a card index - inwards and outwards and on-order and balance-of-order - you had to physically go through them. Even though I hadn't grown up with computers, they certainly made the stock inventory easier. In a given week we might have issued 1500 or 2000 syringes to various departments. The computer used to give us a summary sheet of all that for each week, and we'd only have to enter the summary sheet number. You could always go through it and check back if you needed to. Then last thing every Friday afternoon they'd do a back-up in case something went wrong and they lost the records. I had to learn how to do the back-ups and all that. The back-up programme was quite easy, actually. I was a bit intimidated by computers when they first came in, but we had all the girls and some of the fellows who were working on them - we had special classes for them.

Since the time when they declared all the positions vacant, the Central Supplies Department is no longer at the hospital - it's out at Waterloo in a big old warehouse, and they're handling stuff for Sydney Hospital, Bankstown Hospital, Canterbury Hospital, the Children's Hospital at Camperdown, and all their stuff is supplied by this one section. A lot of the fellows that were in my department are out there now. They have to be computer-able to get the job these days. Some of them weren't able to and they lost their job. The mate of mine who was Purchasing Officer in my department left the hospital. He left with the fellow who was in charge of the surgical and medical division in my department. They both got the golden handshake and got out because things just got untenable for them.

The phone never stopped! It was a pretty responsible job. You had to have a sort of responsibility to the people, too, because you couldn't say you couldn't do something, because you didn't know how urgent it was. A lot of people would make a big fuss and say they had to have something straightaway, and you got to know the people who would regularly do this, and you got to know the ones who were genuine, and you'd bend over backwards to help them.

It was stressful. I'd come home and sometimes I'd wake up in the middle of the night and think of something I should have done, and write it down for first job in the morning. I even got that way I'd go in early, and a fellow called John Hunter from Helensburgh used to get in early too. He'd put the urn on and make coffee, but frequently I wouldn't have it because as soon as I sat down the phone would ring - sometimes twenty minutes before I was supposed to start. But in the last couple of years I'd go in early and leave early - I'd meet some friends and go in with them on the train. It became a bit of a joke around the place, really. One of my mates used to say I was the only bloke he knew who gets on the train at Central before he knocks off! But they didn't realise that I'd been in there an hour early in the morning. John Cremen was flexible about that. He knew the commuting I was doing, and knew my past history in the hospital - without boasting, I really held that place together. I could put up with hell from some of the staff - they were

bastards. Of course there were a lot of good people too. And you couldn't do anything about it then - you just couldn't get rid of people. And I was in the position, too, of being a Life Member of the Association, and it was dreadful if I had to reprimand someone. They'd ring the Union up and call them about me - but they'd just laugh, and say: "Oh, Les wouldn't do that." So that made it a bit awkward at times, and I think at times it held me back, too, with promotions and that. I think eventually I was promoted to the job I was in because I was the only one that could really do the job that they wanted.

I had a mate called Maxie Frenden who was a trainee surgical dresser - they used to call them wardsmen in those days. He asked the sister for something to do, and she told him that he could clean the patients' false teeth. So Maxie went around with a basin and collected all the false teeth and took them into the day room and scrubbed them all up... But then he realised that he had the job of matching all the teeth to the right owners again! It was quite funny at the time - it was the talk of the hospital. He was a good bloke and he was that embarrassed about it! But it all worked out alright in the end.

Another job I had to do was when they opened the new Blackburn Pavilion Theatre block, I was the Liaison Officer with the surgeon on surgical equipment. He was given a budget and he was trying to keep within it by buying all these Pakistani instruments. I drew his attention to the fact that he was buying all screw-joint artery forceps and scissors and that, and the nursing sisters and the surgical people really hated those because they worked loose. They preferred what was called a box joint scissor. He was a surgeon, but I had the knowledge about the instruments, and I knew it was no good buying all this cheap stuff.

Apart from my Union activities, I was in the NSW League of Swimmers - that was an offshoot from the Amateur Swimmers, and I became Vice-President of the NSW League of Swimmers. I was President of the Sydney League of Swimmers, which in those days was headquartered at the old Domain Baths. The Amateurs had one end and we had the other end - and we had our own gymnasium. We used to get some big name sportsmen down there. We had Jimmy Carruthers, who was our first world champion - he was one of our members. And we had a guy named Bill Henderson who was Australian Heavyweight champion. We had wrestling champions - one who comes to mind is Fred Atkins, who was undisputed World Champion. Before the Olympic Games in 1956, as Vice President I was on the Committee that had to sign the affidavits stating that Dawn Fraser had never been paid money for her swimming, so she could go to the Olympics. I was in football clubs and cricket clubs too, but my main interest was always in swimming.

For the past 23 years I've been an office holder in the Bouddi Peninsula Senior Citizens. I was a foundation member of that, and I was also President of our Progress Association here in Bensville. We were the second house in our street.

When I was growing up I was a member of the Labour League of Youth, which later became the Eureka Youth League. We were in that for many years - in fact that's where Jean and I met. We used to have up to 600 at an Easter or Xmas camp. I think we had to pay something like seventeen and sixpence for the whole weekend, and that included your train fare to wherever the camp was and - all

your meals and entertainment. I've always been very interested in music. I don't play any instruments myself but I've always been associated with musicians.

But my life was really centred around the hospital - going there so young and staying there all my working life. In fact I'd have stayed there even longer, but I was commuting from here and with the hip trouble I was having it just got beyond me, you know. I missed work when I left for a while, but with what's happened since, with the complete reorganisation and the shutting down of beds and the change in administration and all that - well I don't worry about it.

I was in the unhappy position where, in my department, I had a little bit of authority, but I also knew a little bit about each section. Even the chap who was in charge of our trade store, where they had sixty-odd tradesmen of all kinds - we used to control the store so that it was independent from the Chief Engineer and so on. So, as a result, I found myself in the position where, if anyone went on holidays it was a case of: "Oh Les'll do that for a fortnight when he's away." I had a few stormy years that way until we started a bit of a training scheme and got enough staff that there was someone who could relieve now and then. But though there were a few turbulent years, overall I'd say they were pretty happy. We had the social club I mentioned, and the sporting teams where we used to play other hospitals and industrial companies and so on. The big organisational changes started about ten years before I left, and I suppose my happiest memories of the job would be in the times before that.

We had our share of accidents. I remember one time one of the fellows... we used to get everything in bulk in the early stages. We'd buy sugar in 70lb bags, tea in 100lb chests, and all that had to be broken up into smaller quantities for the wards and departments - milk used to come in bulk. Over the last few years, instead of the cooks running the kitchens, they brought in Catering Officers, and they started to buy pre-packaged goods, and the sugars would come in individual serves like you get in a restaurant now, and all the bulk buying stopped. We used to get flour and porridge and semolina in 150lb bags, and one of those rolled off once across a fellow's leg and snapped it at the knee. We had another girl there who was an epileptic, and I had to get all these boxwood chocks, like a wedge, and I had them hanging all around the department so that wherever she was, if she took an epileptic fit somebody would shove one of these in her mouth. One time someone put a Biro in her mouth and she bit that in half.

With my union activities, I used to get a bit irate. I was the head of the department, and I'd spend my lunch hour at a union meeting and when I'd get back there'd be half a dozen blokes there playing cards and mucking about, and they'd ask me what happened at the union meeting. I wouldn't tell them. I said to them: "If you're too busy playing cards to go you can find out for yourself. These people are trying to do something for you and you're not interested enough to go." Every now and then you'd go out to the toilet, or you'd lift a box of stuff and under it there'd be a pamphlet about the Communist Party. I didn't object to that, but I did object to the fact that whoever was putting them around was doing it surreptitiously, instead of being more open about it. I think everybody is entitled to their say, but I didn't like the way that this was being done. That caused a bit of trouble because nobody knew who was doing it, (though I had my ideas about it). I didn't object to their policies, especially since in those days the Russians were doing all sorts of things in the war and without them we'd have been in all the trouble in the world without them. Churchill himself said that seven-eighths of the

German Army were on the Russian Front. If I had been a member of the Communist Party, I don't think it would have done me any good in the hospital. As it was I think I was held back to some extent by my union affiliations.

I had another good friend who died only recently - he had Alzheimer's - who was the editor of *Tribune*. On Sunday nights they used to have these plays in a hall down near the Quay. They were quite good, and were plays about the workers and all that sort of things written from the Left side. Billy used to do all the stage lighting there. I first met him when he joined the swimming club, and we became lifelong friends. He married a girl who was working full time for the Communist Party. She'd had several trips to Russia. Billy was a fellow that loved life, loved his sport, and you wouldn't have thought he was the sort of fellow to be interested in anything like that. I don't know whether she indoctrinated him or what, but in the end he was editing *Tribune*. I admired Bill for his attitude. We had a good, varied cross-section of friends.

I felt that I was exploited in my job when they shifted me from job to job whenever it suited them. I'd get back to my own job after standing in for someone else and there'd be my own work piled up waiting to be done. And the final irony was that when I went on annual leave, most of my routine work was still sitting on my desk waiting to be done when I got back! It got worse when the administration moved and became more remote. It made the separation between bosses and workers more distinct. But the very top blokes were always approachable. Because I knew them all, I'd often go straight to them with a problem, and bypass all the other levels in Administration. Of course sooner or later it'd get back that I'd gone over someone's head, and it didn't make me too popular at times.

In my position I met a lot of people from companies that did business with us. One particular friend, when I first met him he was a rep for Elliott Brothers and Australian Drug (which later on became DHA (NSW) - they had a big warehouse out at Tempe - then it became Anax when they were bought by another company). When they were DHA they were taking one of their fellows off the job of country rep, and this mate of mine there right or wrong wanted me to take that job. It was all fixed up and all I had to do was to say yes. I thought about it. It was nice - more money, a new modern car - it sounded good to start with. But when I spoke to another chap about it who done that sort of job he said: "Look, Les, it's not all that much fun. I'm a bit of a larrikin and I used to like to get away, but think twice about it because you're a family man." I didn't know whether to take it or not, but eventually I decided against it.

Then the Boots Pure Drug Company were starting up out here and they wanted somebody to take over their surgical division. I applied for the job and it came down to two of us. The chap that got it was in charge of the Surgical Division at DHA and had had business experience. Then he wanted me to go as his offsider, but they were out Roseville way and when I thought about the travelling that put me off it.

They were a couple of opportunities I had to go somewhere else to work, but I'm glad I stayed at Prince Alfred. I had a job all my working life where I had a steady income and things got better as we went along. The superannuation got better, and I was getting a ten percent long service bonus (which they don't get now - it

was cut out some years ago for new employees). So all in all we've done alright. We've had a comfortable life. Both the boys have had good educations, we've always lived pretty well, eaten pretty well, had good holidays and that - so I've got no regrets - no regrets whatsoever. I think a lot depends on your partner, too. We've always been very compatible and get on very well together. We've had our ups and down, but overall things levelled off pretty well. I'm happy with my lot.

(Recorded August 25 & September 1 1995)