



Waitemata
District Health Board
Best Care for Everyone

**Communications Dept
Corporate Office**
*Level 2, 15 Shea Terrace
Private Bag 93-503,
Takapuna
Auckland 0740
Telephone: 09 486 8955*

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Father of Orthopaedics

Waitemata DHB's very own "Father of Orthopaedics" is winding down a career that dates back to 1962.

But the 79-year-old John Cullen has one final task to complete before his intended retirement.

On June 9, he will join Health Minister Hon Dr Jonathan Coleman to officially open the new Whenua Pupuke-Waitemata Clinical Skills Centre at North Shore Hospital.

The centre, which will have cost under \$9.84 million by the time a final tally is available, is very much Cullen's swan song. He's overseen its development from design stage to completion and is passionate about the training opportunities it presents to a new generation of clinicians.

"The building will be a place of learning - developing employees to build confidence, improve performance, and practice their clinical skills so that they are more competent and confident in clinical settings when working with patients," he says. "It allows closer collaboration between Waitemata DHB and our universities and between primary and secondary health care."

Cullen, who celebrates his 80th birthday in September, established the Auckland Hospital orthopaedic service with two other orthopaedic surgeons in 1971. He set up the Waitemata DHB's first acute and elective orthopaedic service at North Shore and Waitakere Hospitals in 2004.

"We call him the Father of Orthopaedics," CEO Dr Dale Bramley says. "He has literally built up the entire service from scratch to serve more than 600,000 New Zealanders today. There are few people I know who have contributed so much over so many years to the development of health services in Auckland. John Cullen is a truly outstanding clinician, mentor and health advocate."

Cullen's surgical career started with an appointment as Junior/Senior House Surgeon at Palmerston North in 1962. He was already setting a blistering pace – working and studying long hours while still finding time to raise a family and pursue multiple sporting endeavours.

His prowess on the hockey field saw him turn out with the New Zealand team at the 1960 (Rome) and 1964 (Tokyo) Olympic Games.

Cullen attended Oxford University on a three-year Nuffield scholarship from 1968 to 1970 for research and Post Graduate training in orthopaedic surgery.

He returned to New Zealand in 1971 to pursue and spread his talents across the tertiary private and public health sectors in the following years. He was a senior lecturer in orthopaedic surgery at the University of Auckland Medical School from 1972 to 1976 and spent another year with the faculty as an associate professor in 1977.

Cullen has held a range of senior positions within the Auckland and Waitemata DHBs.

He was the clinical sponsor for the \$39 million Elective Surgery centre that opened on the North Shore Hospital site in 2013 and for introducing significant changes in models of patient care. The centre's main ward is named in his honour, The Cullen Ward.

Cullen performed the first operation in the facility as its director. It was also his last, one of at least 3000 total hip and 2000 total knee replacements, before he stepped away from surgery to focus on his directorship with Awhina – a division of the DHB tasked with developing learning, research and innovation capabilities to improve patient outcomes.

The father of three was made a Member of the New Zealand Order of Merit in 2010 for services to medicine.

Cullen looks back on a long career marked by rapid change and technological advance.

“There was not one operation that I was trained to do as a young surgeon that I was still doing when I finished surgery,” he says. “My years in orthopaedic surgery were the years of innovation and change - new hips, new knees, new everything and major changes in the management of trauma. They were exciting years.”

Caption 1: John Cullen, MBChB graduate, 1961

Caption 2: Olympian John Cullen, 1960

Caption 3: John Cullen in theatre, 2004

Caption 4: Awhina Director John Cullen on site during construction of Whenua Pupuke, 2017

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For further information contact:

Matt Gray

021 410 178

matthew.gray@waitematadhb.govt.nz

or the Waitemata DHB media line:

4871276