

MY SUNDAY

VICKI PEARSON

doctor

By MEG STEWART



DR VICKI PEARSON has long fair hair to her waist. She always has worn it loose. "For delicate procedures such as suturing in casualty I used to tie it back with a bandage."

Dr Pearson is medical superintendent of Sydney Hospital. Unperturbed by the St Elsewhere chaos of renovation, her green eyes flash with affection. This is her hospital. Patients and staff alike are "darling" and "sweetie."

The scar on her wrist is where Ernest, one of the hospital's park people, kissed her. Park people are as much a part of Sydney Hospital as its historic facade. Sydney's derelict and alcoholic men of the streets love the hospital. "They feel at home here," Dr Pearson says amicably.

"In casualty we give them a chair, a blanket, a cup of tea and let them sit in the Domain for four hours. We keep an eye on them out the windows and the security staff make sure they don't wander off. We have special low beds so they don't have too far to fall if they roll off."

Sydney Hospital isn't only 120 beds in the wards at Macquarie Street. There's the casualty department serving the central business district with a working and resident population police estimate at 1.5 million; a new occupational and health safety unit dealing especially with repetitive strain injuries; and a health screening and information service for quick check-ups. It's also the Sydney Eye Hospital, the Albion Street Centre for AIDS and the sexually transmitted diseases clinic at the Quay, which is about to be moved to Macquarie Street.

When she was appointed as the superintendent in early 1980, Dr Pearson was, at 30, the youngest medical superintendent at a teaching hospital in Australia - and the first female.

"During my casualty years I worked one in three Sundays, or one in two. My husband Ian got used to it. He learnt to go winter sailing.

"Casualty can mean anything from an imbedded earring stud to the three people the police brought in from Sydney airport. Between them they had swallowed 150 condoms filled with hash oil. It took police two days to retrieve the haul. Only one condom broke and afterwards casualty staff sent a letter of commendation to the manufacturer.

"Then there are eccentrics such as Brendon, who used to roller skate round the city with two dogs pulling him. Brendon's moved to Windsor now and has horses. Every time he breaks a bone - and he's always breaking them - he rides a horse in over the Harbour Bridge and tethers it outside casualty," Dr Pearson said.

"I used to go on duty at 8 on Saturday morning and work through until I am. I slept at the hospital. Probably two or three times after that I would be called out again. I would have three or four hours' sleep before the switch, rang me at 7 on Sunday morning. I didn't go on until 8.30 but it takes me a while to do my make-up." Dr Pearson never goes anywhere un-made-up.

"Sunday I would work another 16 hours, go to bed at midnight, then have another couple of calls. Monday morning I'd be back on duty.

"Sundays in casualty are relatively quiet at Sydney Hospital. In the city there's not so much happening on a Sunday. A normal Sunday would average about 20 acute cases; cardiac arrests, serious head injuries requiring immediate assessment. About six to 10 of these would be admitted to hospital."

Dr Pearson still works 70 to 80 hours a week. "Day-to-day administrative crises are a lot like casualty." But her Sundays are more leisurely. "I wake about 5 but don't get up until 9. I curl up and read in bed. My passion is the trashiest murder mysteries. I could read Agatha Christie 12 times and not remember the plot."

A simple brunch with friends follows in the courtyard of the Pearson's 1876 stone and sand-stock brick terrace at Rozelle.

"Then I often get stuck into some hospital paper work.

"Both Ian and I are keen cooks. I can work on something for hours and it will taste all right. Ian comes along, adds one more thing and it's magic. On Sunday afternoon we prepare an elegant evening repast - like whisky prawns, which need expert surgical de-veining of the green prawns.

"Monday mornings I'm up at 5.30 or 6, put my make-up on, feed the cats and get to the hospital by 7 so I can spend a couple of hours catching up before the day begins."