



## **Citation for the Award of the Degree of Doctor of the University *honoris causa***

### **Dr Richard Harris SC OAM (BMBS '89) Joint Australian of the Year 2019**

Dr Richard Harris (Harry) is a specialist anaesthetist who completed his Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery at Flinders University in 1988.

Dr Harris joined the Specialist Anaesthetic Services (SAS) practice in 1998 after completing his anaesthesia training in the UK, Adelaide and New Zealand. He has particular interest in anaesthesia for breast and endocrine surgery, ENT and acoustic neuroma surgery, upper GI surgery and endoscopy.

He has worked in a variety of critical care and retrieval environments in Australia, the UK, Vanuatu and New Zealand. Dr Harris started working with SAAS MedSTAR in 2012 and he is currently the medical lead for the SA Urban Search and Rescue Task Force.

Dr Harris' medical interests have a broader base. He has managed to combine his taste for adventure with his medical practice and a lifelong interest in the underwater world. This led him into the field of diving and hyperbaric medicine. His work at South Australia's emergency medical retrieval service (MedSTAR) as an aeromedical consultant continues to challenge him with the care of critically ill patients in remote and austere environments.

He has worked with AusAID in the Pacific Island nation of Vanuatu for two years providing anaesthesia and intensive care services in the setting of a developing medical system.

In his spare time he can usually be found exploring underwater caves, a passion he has pursued for over thirty years. His love of underwater exploration has led him to work on National Geographic documentaries, feature films and with various teams worldwide in the role of diver, underwater cameraman and of course medical support. He is a member of the Explorers Club of New York and received an Australian award for "*Outstanding Contributions to Cave Exploration*".

In July 2018, Dr Harris was requested to join an international rescue operation that would be followed by millions around the world – the rescue of 12 boys and their soccer coach from within the Tham Luang Nang Non cave in Thailand.

Dr Harris applied his rare and unique cave-diving skills to the task. Such was his acclaim in familiar circles that British experts specifically requested his expertise to help navigate the cave system, said to be among the most dangerous in the world.

Dr Harris conducted initial medical assessments on the boys and advised authorities on the safest extraction methods. On the day of evacuation, he gave the medical all-clear for each boy and administered anaesthesia before they left the cave.

He was the last person out of the cave each day.

Since the successful rescue operation Dr Harris and his dive partner Dr Craig Challen graciously said that they were only a small part of a larger rescue team. While that may be true, Flinders University were honoured that a graduate of his calibre was at the heart of a mission that captured the attention of the world. Most importantly, his efforts and that of the wider rescue team resulted in the safe return of the boys and their coach back to their family, friends and wider community – an amazing achievement given the circumstances.

Following the safe rescue of the team and the coach, upon his return Dr Harris along with eight other Australians involved in the operation were honoured with bravery awards. For Dr Harris (along with Dr Challen), he was awarded the Star of Courage (for acts of conspicuous courage in circumstances of great peril) for his crucial part in the 18-day rescue operation – the second highest Australian civilian bravery award. At that time Dr Harris was also awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia for service to the international community through specialist response roles during the Tham Luang cave rescue in Thailand in 2018. In early 2019, Drs Harris and Challen were honoured with the coveted Australian of the Year award.

The rescue of 12 boys and their soccer coach from a cave in Thailand is not the first time Dr Harris has been involved in a harrowing and difficult cave retrieval mission.

His cave diving skills were also called upon in 2011, when he had the difficult task of recovering the body of his friend (and Flinders graduate) Agnes Milowka, after she ran out of air in Tank Cave near Mount Gambier in South Australia. Dr Harris led the expert cave divers who helped police in the recovery of her body, called upon to assist because of the complexities of the almost eight-kilometre stretch of twisting underwater passages.

Flinders University wishes to acknowledge the selfless role Dr Harris has played in these and many other rescue operations. Last year's incident in Thailand not only captured the world's attention, but also for the period brought people and countries together around the world as millions watched on as humanity triumphed over adversity.

Dr Harris is an outstanding role model in all that he does - from his specialist anaesthetist skills to his experience in the field of diving and hyperbaric medicine. During his involvement in the Thai Cave rescue, many have admired the humble way he focused on the 'us' not the 'I' as part of the operation and the way in which he requested to 'just get back to normal' on his return to Australia demonstrating his commitment to his role and skills.

Dr Harris is an extremely worthy recipient of a Doctor of the University *honoris causa* from Flinders University.