Left his mark ... Professor Alan Owen made a lasting difference to the care of patients in NSW. Photo: Supplied

In a life devoted to improving health outcomes for patients, Professor Alan Owen endured more than his share of first-hand experience. His first research pioneered "pseudo-patient" studies, finding doctors were not communicating with patients. Unfortunately, Owen spent rather too much of his subsequent life as a patient.

The last of many thousands of words he wrote about the health system was an appreciation of the care he had received at Wollongong Hospital during 15 years, "being treated as a human, with love, compassion and recognition". These were Owen's ideals for the health system. He, in turn, recognised haematologists, oncologists, nurses, clerks and other front-line staff, generously and by name.

Alan Graeme Owen was born on February 22, 1952, the son of Eric and Daisy Owen, and grew up in Penshurst. As a child, he was the prodigy of the First Hurstville Grove Cub-Scouts Pack and was awarded all possible badges. He was an outstanding soccer and water polo player at Sydney Technical High School and a junior state track cycling champion.
He studied psychology and sociology at the University of NSW, where he found his intellectual passions and lifelong commitments to social justice and community health. He followed his mentor and supervisor Robin Winkler to Perth to pursue a PhD at the University of Western Australia. After completing the research, this was derailed by tedium, Robin's death and by Owen's need to get a haircut and a real job. Owen worked with friends and colleagues on many short- and long-term projects. The Pala project began in 1976 as an early experimental therapeutic community in Glebe, championing psychiatric care without abuse of power.

Owen also devoted 30 years to "Budderoo", a collective purchase of 180 hectares in the Kangaroo Valley. He was a driving force in rallying a group and establishing corporate and regulatory structures to regenerate and develop the land sustainably. Despite this collective work, his own dwelling there was always deferred: in Owen's life, the communal often trumped the individual.

Working with Howard Gwynne, Owen was an architect of the NSW community health program, established with funds from the Whitlam government. He then worked directly in that program at Bondi Junction, where the Council Street alternative mental health project networked with Waverley Council, Pala and other community support services.

As funding dried up and the tide turned against alternative approaches to community care, Owen played a leading role in "Save Community Health" campaigns and in establishing the Australian Community Health Association in 1984.

In the 1990s Owen consolidated his role and reputation as a leader in health policy with the Health Department and the Office on Ageing. Midway through that decade he moved with his partner, Linda Adamson, and their daughter Ruby to Thirroul. Within a couple of years, first Adamson, then Owen was diagnosed with multiple myeloma, a rare bone marrow cancer. After Adamson died in 2000, Owen was a devoted single father to Ruby. His goal was to see Ruby through to adulthood, which he achieved against the odds.

Working closely with Professor Kathy Eagar from 1996, Owen contributed much to the success of the Centre for Health Service Development at the University of Wollongong.

Owen had a number of NSW Ministerial appointments: to the review of the privatisation of Port Macquarie Base Hospital in 1993; as a part-time member of the NSW Guardianship Tribunal from 1996-2009; and, from 1994, as a part-time member of the Mental Health Review Tribunal in NSW. He was appointed to a professorial position at the University of Wollongong in November.

Alan Owen is survived by Ruby, partner Michele Moore, brother Neville and his family, and brother-in-law Peter Adamson and family.

Trish Kenny, Richard Mohr and Kathy Eagar