With a wild and woolly background gallivanting around Africa to study elephants, and clocking up academic positions at universities around the globe, English veterinarian Roger Short had enjoyed a far more colourful career than most of us could dream of when, in the 1970s, he met Peter Scott of the World Wildlife Fund.

Scott lamented that the big lesson he had learned from his life's travels was that he should have spent his career distributing condoms. It was a statement that struck a chord with Short, who decided that henceforth he would study human fertility and population growth.

Now 82, Short's roving mind refuses to be harnessed onto any one topic – in the past year or so he's published papers on jetlag in racehorses, melatonin and the plight of nuns. "They die of three things," he says of the latter. "Cancer of breast, ovary and uterus. It's from having menstrual cycles for the whole of their life. That's just disaster. We weren't designed to do that."

To this end, Short believes the birth control pill is one of the world's greatest inventions. "There are no known health deficits," he claims contentiously, "and a woman need never have a period again. Side effects are just a protection by the manufacturer to make sure they don't get sued. The drug is only on prescription so that everyone who wants it has to go to the doctor for years. The cost of these to you is $1.60 a pill, yet the manufacturing cost is a fraction of a cent."

Tucked away in a modest University of Melbourne office is one of the world's most celebrated and often controversial biologists. 

By Jenny Valentish

There are so many big cons in the medical profession, which is why I'm glad I'm a vet..."

In the past decade, Short has devoted much of his time to HIV prevention ("pharmaceutical companies are only interested in treatment, they're not interested in prevention. There's no money in it"). He's clashed horns with Cardinal Pell over distributing condoms to students and sparred with atheist du jour Richard Dawkins: "Dawkins links religion to insanity, while Short backs the concept of humans having a 'god gene' that predisposes some of us to spirituality. (Short, incidentally, refers to Dawkins' bestseller The God Delusion as "The Dawkins Delusion"..."

The last major project he would like to oversee is already underway: "The standard of sex education in schools is abysmal because you've got a diametrically opposed Department of Health who wants to do one thing and a Department of Education that wants to do something completely different – and the religious influences that don't want any of it," he says. "So why don't we have a 'teach the teacher' programme, where final-year medical students go and teach all the final-year education students? I don't know of another country that does this. And it doesn't cost a cent."

We sign off as Short prepares to head off to the Mauna Loa Observatory in Hawaii ("I still go gallivanting"), to nose around its recordings of the world's CO2 emissions. Global warming, he's long claimed, is down to overpopulation – as is terrorism. "The pill," he says, "and women being able to control their own fertility, is the answer."