

Dr Kate Campbell, DBE, MD, FRCOG, Hon LLD (1899–1986).



During the Second World War, Dr Campbell was a paediatrician to the Queen Victoria and the Royal Women's Hospital in Melbourne, at a time when the Retinopathy of Prematurity (ROP) was a serious problem.

Dr Campbell noted that there was a marked difference in the incidence of ROP in premature babies born at the Queen Victoria and Women's Hospitals.

She was struck by the fact that the Women's Hospital was relatively well off and used oxygen lavishly in the management of premature babies. The incidence was much lower at the Queen Victoria Hospital-where such oxygen usage could not be afforded. She suspected that the disease was related to the concentration of oxygen to which the babies were exposed. She wrote to Professor Norman Ashton, recently appointed Head of Pathology at the Institute of Ophthalmology, in London. His particular field was diseases of the retinal arterioles in diabetes and ROP. Ashton designed a research technique which allowed him to study variations in the calibre of retinal arterioles in premature kittens exposed to different oxygen concentrations. He added to the research team a young Australian trainee ophthalmologist, Dr Geoffrey Serpell, possibly as a gesture to Kate Campbell.

Kate Campbell's hypothesis was proved correct and the use of oxygen in premature infants has been strictly controlled ever since.

It is disappointing that Prof Ashton never gave to Drs Campbell and Serpell the recognition they deserved; in particular Dr Kate Campbell was not mentioned in the original paper, a paper which established Prof Ashton's reputation.

In 1964 Dr Kate Campbell shared the inaugural Britannica-Australian Award for medicine with Sir Norman Gregg whose contribution to Ophthalmology is honoured by the Gregg Lecture at the Annual Scientific Meeting of the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Ophthalmologists.

Contributed by J.E.K. Galbraith