

Professor Francis (Frank) Alfred Billson AO, President of the Royal Australian College of Ophthalmologists, 1987 - 1988

Professor Frank Billson is married and has two children. His service and involvement in the College commenced in Melbourne in the 1960s.

Frank was educated at the Melbourne Church of England Grammar School and graduated in medicine from the University of Melbourne in 1958. From 1959 to 1961 he worked at the Alfred Hospital, and then travelled to England where he gained a Diploma in Ophthalmology in London in 1962. He was admitted as a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons Edinburgh in 1965; the Royal College of Surgeons London in 1966; the Royal College of Australasian Surgeons in 1966; Member of the Australian College of Ophthalmologists in 1975; and became Associate Ophthalmic Surgeon Head, Alfred Hospital, Melbourne from 1967 to 1974; Head of Division of Paediatric Ophthalmology, Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne from 1969 to 1976; Ophthalmologist, Mercy Mater Hospital Melbourne, Neonatal Unit from 1971 to 1976; and Ophthalmologist, Royal Women's Hospital Melbourne, Neonatal Unit from 1972 to 1976, before his appointment as Foundation Professor of Clinical Ophthalmology at the University of Sydney in 1977. He became a Fellow of the American College of Surgeons in 1977; American Academy of Ophthalmology in 1978; and Fellow of the Royal Australian College of Ophthalmologists when it was given the Royal assent in 1978.

Professor Billson was Chair of the Victorian Qualification and Education Committee (QEC) and served on the College's QEC from 1973 to 1983 and was Censor-in-Chief from 1978 to 1982. He has also served on the College Journal Editorial Committee, the Finance Committee, the Undergraduate Education Committee and the Orthoptic Board of Australia. He was Chairman of the Victorian Branch from 1972 to 1983 and a College Council member from 1973 to 1982. He became a member of the College Executive and Vice-President Elect in 1985 and served on the International Council of Ophthalmology from 1986 to 1994, remaining on the Advisory Council until 2002. In 1985, at the Annual Congress which was held in Hong Kong, he gave the Council Lecture entitled "The Science of Ophthalmology" which aroused a great deal of thought and discussion. He quoted the Head of the National Health and Medical Research Council (NH&MRC) as saying that "it is critical for medical graduates and researchers to convince politicians and the community of the benefits of the medical research, the significance of our past achievements, the priority of our current research aims and the consequences if adequate funds do not become available. To do this it is important that we make our aims and achievements more intelligible, and more immediately relevant to the decision makers in government." Professor Billson then went on to expand on aims, communication, and funds, then considered the science of ophthalmology and its clinical, epidemiological and basic science components in the settings of the clinic, the community and the laboratory.

Frank was elected Member of the International Academy of Ophthalmology in 1988 and became a Council Member of the Asia Pacific Academy of Ophthalmology (APAO) representing Australia from 1988 where he served the College with distinction, raising the prominence of the College amongst his peers. His work in basic ophthalmological research and his service to the underprivileged overseas in Bangladesh and East Timor, has added to the College's prestige and reputation; and the Ophthalmic Research Institute of Australia (ORIA) has benefited from his advice as a member of their Board since 1986. For the time he has given to the College in a selfless, meritorious and distinguished manner he was awarded the College Medal in 2000. He had already been recognised by others with many awards but in particular his award of the Order of Australia in 1987; and in 1994 of the Sir Edward "Weary" Dunlop Asia Medal for services in the Asia Pacific Region. In 2001 he was recognised by the APAO with an Outstanding Services Award in the Prevention of Blindness and in 2005 the Jose Rizal Medal; in 2006 he was awarded the NSW Senior Australian of the Year for saving the sight of premature babies; and in 2011 he was awarded the GOH Naumann Award for Leadership in Global Care.

Besides his many appointments on various Editorial Boards of Scientific Journals and Research Foundations during his active career, Professor Billson has served in many Community roles and has been a Sydney Eye Hospital Foundation Governor since 1983; has served on the Sydney Hospital Executive Board since 1997; and Chair of the Sydney Eye Hospital Registrar Training Committee since 1977. He was Foundation Director of the Save Sight Institute in Sydney from 1985 to 2009; and Lions Professor Eye Health since 1985; Director Lions NSW Eye Bank since 1996; and Chairman of Foresight Australia since 1977; Chairman, Sight for Life Foundation since 2007; and Emeritus Professor of Clinical Ophthalmology at the University of Sydney since his retirement in 2009.

During his term as President a special committee was formed to examine the future accommodation needs and intended use of the building in Commonwealth Street, gifted to the College by the NSW Medical Eye Service. The College pressed the Commissioner of the Federal Police for a decision on action regarding the gross invasion of the Queensland Fellows' rights regarding the raid on their premises and patients' records, but received notification that no further action was proposed. The College continued to press the Federal Health Minister and the Department for restoration of the rebate for cataract/implant surgery to no avail, but most State branches managed to negotiate modified fees for service for public patients with State Governments. The Federal Government's Medical Education and Medical Manpower Committee's report was released and because of implications regarding the College's role in future training, continuing education, and manpower, comments were sought from Councillors and QEC members for the preparation of a coordinated and strongly based response. Organised Optometry continued to be an issue in lobbying governments with a view to making inroads into areas which were the responsibility of the medical profession. Because of the increased activity by optometrists in Visual Screening of School Children resulting in a number of ill-advised and ill-informed procedures and activities generated by some sections of Optometry, the College re-established the committee which had considered this issue previously. The first draft of the History of the College was completed. The College of Ophthalmologists was established in London with Professor Wallace Foulds as President. Other initiatives introduced were: a protocol for ophthalmic day surgery facilities was compiled by the Intra-Ocular Implant & Day Surgery Committee; College Citations were introduced to acknowledge major contributions by Fellows to activities of the College; the Ida Mann Lecture was introduced to be delivered by an Australian or New Zealander with an emphasis on visual science; a special gown to be worn by the Executive Secretary on ceremonial occasions only, was introduced; Ophthalmologists trained elsewhere and recognised by the Federal Government as specialists practising in Australia were offered Ophthalmological Associate membership rather than having to wait for three years after registration, as they had done previously; an ad-hoc committee was established to examine a mechanism to investigate complaints against members of the College; and a proposal to establish a Court of Honour was to be examined. In the training area, the QEC introduced an alternative from supervised hospital posts to experience in general practice, research or teaching for the third year of training and explored the nature of fourth year requirements; Dr Ken Howsam provided an inspection protocol for training posts; negotiations of fees in discussion with the Federal Government had been taken over by the AMA but this had ceased and any alteration in fees made by the Department of Health was unilateral. There was an unprecedented attack on the medical profession as a whole through (and by) the media and the reduction in the Medicare rebate had been fuelled with misleading information aimed at ophthalmologists, but a united, constructive and positive response to media enquiries generated by the attacks was maintained: success of the cataract rebate issue and good media coverage in the early stages of the campaign assisted positive public relations efforts. Large circulation regional and capital newspapers granted substantial space to articles on eye care, surgery, contact lenses, new technologies, glare and VDU terminals while the Bulletin and Choice magazines ran articles on "The Crises in Surgery" and "Caring for Your eyes"

In his Presidential Address in 1988 he spoke of his past year as President and welcomed to the College the new Fellows both by examination and invitation. At this Opening Ceremony, the plaque was unveiled, commemorating the gift of the building in Commonwealth Street, Sydney, from the Ophthalmic Association Ltd (Medical Eye Service of New South Wales), allowing a permanent home for the College.