

Geoffrey William Harley AM, President of the Royal Australian College of Ophthalmologists, 1979 - 1980

Geoffrey Harley was born on 20 September 1928 in Victoria and died on 19 November 2004 aged 76. He was married and is father to three sons. His father developed a debilitating illness in 1947 which put an end to his promising career as an honorary obstetrician and GP, and threw the family into straightened times. Geoff was educated at Geelong Grammar and although thrown into the position of 'head of the family' by his father's illness, he commenced his study of medicine in 1947. Having been deferred for one year, reading fine arts and learning violin, he graduated with MB BS in December 1954. He then worked at the Royal Melbourne Hospital until he sought ophthalmology training in London in 1960. He pursued paediatric ophthalmology and from 1983 to 1993 he was head of paediatric ophthalmology at the Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne.

One of Geoff Harley's great achievements was the major role he played in the founding of the College. In 1964, at a meeting of the Victorian State Section of the OSA, he proposed the motion that the Victorian Section form a sub-committee to investigate the possibility of forming an Australian College of Ophthalmologists, with the objective of establishing uniform Australian training and academic standards. Four years later this was achieved, after he and Ken Howsam worked on the long and laborious task of drafting the Memorandum of Articles of Association of the new College. Other initiatives he supported were: the decision to publish the Australian Journal of Ophthalmology to stimulate academic and clinical reporting; the formation of the first Qualification and Education Committee; and the implementation of a common final examination with the Ophthalmological Society of New Zealand (OSNZ), paving the way for the later amalgamation of the two bodies.

Having been a driving force in establishing the College, Geoff served on the Council for 16 years playing an important part in enhancing the College's relationship with other medical bodies. Between 1972 and 1975 he was heavily involved with the committee negotiating with the Whitlam Government, including discussions with Deeble & Scotton, in the development of a Medicare system that was in the best interests of practising ophthalmologists.

Details of the 'rise and fall' of the original Medicare system were depicted in his Presidential Address. In his Address he also spoke of the 90 year Trans-Tasman links and hints of developments that would draw the two bodies together. He covered the history of the development of ocular medicine since before Hippocrates and the development of professional integrity in medicine, based on the principles of Hippocrates; that the principles developed through the Renaissance were embodied in the Charters of the first Royal Colleges of Physicians and Surgeons, then embodied in the rules and objectives of medical societies, and finally became enshrined in legislation governing the practice of medicine.

It was during the 18th century that British physicians broke off association with those who sold remedies with their advice, and surgeons moved out of the barber shops. This was due to the established principle that medical practice should be divorced from commercial enterprise and this principle was based on the determinant that when the doctor gives a patient a prescription it is in the patient's interest rather than his own. Any ophthalmologist who became involved in commercial activities such as the sale of spectacles would be subject to severe criticism from colleagues and sharp reaction from professional bodies. Upholding these principles was not always easy, such as having to resist supplying contact lenses; and it was difficult to enter into close relationships with those who do not play the game by the same rules, hence the unhappy relationship between ophthalmology and optometry. He also touched upon the threat of new technologies impacting on professionalism, using intra-ocular lenses and operations to try to correct long and short-sightedness, as well as the introduction of Medicare. He iterated that the responsibility for upholding professionalism rests with the individual and with the College.

Geoff Harley served as medical secretary of the National Trachoma and Eye Health Program which established the College's credentials in the community with its interest in the health of the indigenous and remote communities. He was responsible for directing, with tact and ingenuity, the field work conducted by Fred Hollows. He also worked for the delivery of essential medical and surgical ophthalmology to developing countries in the Pacific.

During his term as President:

- close working relationships were developed with the Ophthalmological Society of the United Kingdom (OSUK), the American Academy of Ophthalmology (AAO), the OSNZ and the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons (RACS);
- the Report of the National Trachoma and Eye Health Program (NT&EHP) was presented to the Minister for Health but the future of the program was not resolved;
- the Commonwealth Institute of Health was commissioned to do an Ophthalmic Manpower study to indicate the needs for the rest of the 20th Century;
- the Qualification and Education Committee (QEC) increased activities regarding pre-vocational training and accreditation of training posts with the first inspections taking place, and the introduction of log books;
- "Biophysics for Ophthalmologists" was produced and became required reading for the Ophthalmic Basic Sciences;
- Continuing Education was developed further with the addition of AAO Self-Assessment and TV Programs to the Annual Scientific Calendar.

For his contributions to the development of ophthalmology through the National Trachoma and Eye Health Program, the Royal Children's Hospital, professional associations, and Humanitarian support to the developing countries in the Pacific, in 2003 he was appointed Member of the Order of Australia; and in 2004 he was awarded the prestigious College Gold Medal. The Medal citation concluded with the following words: "Geoff Harley's vision and advocacy, his significant role in the founding of the College, and the defence of the interests of that College over many years, have to a large extent helped to make it what it is today. His influence will continue to be felt for many years. We all owe Geoff Harley a great debt". He was unable to be present to accept the Medal as he was ill in hospital, therefore the Medal was presented to his wife Judith who delivered it to him in hospital but he died within the week.

Geoff's great loves were music, golf and water skiing at Point Lonsdale, and sailing at Flinders.