

James Foster, Inaugural President of the Australian College of Ophthalmologists, 30 May 1969 – 1970

James Foster was born on 23 August 1917 and died on 28 April 1988. He married in 1944 and was father to two children – one boy and one girl.

After completing his schooling in Melbourne he went with his family to England and gained an MA at Cambridge in 1939. On the outbreak of World War II the family returned to Melbourne and he gained his MB BS from Melbourne University in 1942, then became RMO at the Alfred Hospital from 1942 – 1943.

James joined the RAAF and served in New Guinea and the Pacific Islands from 1943 – 1946, rising to the rank of Flight Lieutenant. Following discharge from the RAAF he trained in ophthalmology at RVEEH from 1946 – 1947; he passed his FRACS before going to London where he was Registrar and Tutor at Moorfields Eye Hospital from 1947 – 1949. He returned to Melbourne in 1949 to join the Eye Department at the Royal Melbourne Hospital under Tom Travers. He served as Assistant Surgeon, Royal Melbourne Hospital 1950 – 1957 until his appointment as Senior Ophthalmologist at the Alfred Hospital from 1957. He established a Diabetic Eye Clinic at the Alfred and encouraged interaction between the departments in the hospital. During his time at the Alfred he was consultant to the Victorian Institute for the Blind and was made a Life Governor of the Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind. After he retired in 1976 he concentrated his practice in Frankston as Ophthalmic Surgeon until 1984. His sub-specialty interest was anterior segment surgery including keratoplasty.

During his time at the Alfred he also served the College in various roles including: Chairman, Victorian Branch OSA 1960; Final President OSA 1968 – 1969; Qualification and Education Committee Member in Victoria from 1969 – 1975; and contributed to the formation of the Constitution of the Australian College of Ophthalmologists. He also became Patron of the Orthoptic Association in 1969.

In his Presidential Address, James Foster foresaw that Australia, “being a treasure-trove of vast mineral wealth, and a democratic nation to boot, would be challenged by covetous neighbours, and ophthalmologists, together with other scientific and commercial leaders, would be called upon to play a part in the development of this area of the world”. He believed that with the establishment of the College, ophthalmologists had started to meet this challenge and he encouraged the relatively few members to think big and to act big to achieve big things.

He pronounced that the College had become necessary for the coordinated training of ophthalmologists in Australia, and in order to ensure cohesion of the College he recommended that:

1. postgraduate teaching be kept at the highest possible level;
2. the Council avoids becoming a “remote body”; and
3. development of sub-specialty, autonomous associations be encouraged to grow as branches, administered by standing committees, and represented on Council with full voting rights.

James Foster foresaw that the College would have members living in many countries through which links of goodwill would be forged throughout the world. He anticipated that many post-graduate students from neighbouring countries would come here to benefit from the College; and he forecast a ‘brain drain’ from the United States to Australia up until the new millennium. He commended Sir Stewart Duke-Elder’s words from the last meeting of the Ophthalmological Society of Australia, “to take the opportunity to be the intellectual and scientific leader of this quadrant of the globe”.

His recreational interests included gardening, works of art and antiques. He was the RACO Tennis Champion in 1982 and 1983.