

## **James McBride-White, President of the Australian College of Ophthalmologists, 1976 - 1977**

James McBride-White was born on 26 June 1916 at Narrandera in NSW and died in May 1992. He was married and the father of two boys and one girl. He gained MB BS Sydney 1941, DO Sydney 1948, FRACS 1959, FRACO 1978. James served in the Australian Army Medical Corps from 30 November 1942 to 15 April 1947 and served as a Colonel, Consultant Ophthalmologist to the army for 15 years from 1963 to 1978. He also served on the Servicemen's Defence Committee and was a Senior Ophthalmic Surgeon at the RVEEH from 1965 to 1970. At the RVEEH he was Chair of the Medical Staff for 11 years; served on the Hospital Board for 20 years; and was President of the Victorian Branch prior to becoming President of the College. He worked with the Royal Flying Doctor in 1976 and had a practice at 12 Collins Street, Melbourne.

It is recorded that in Brisbane in 1945 Peter English and he performed the first recorded corneal graft in Australia, although it is claimed that Walter Lockhart Gibson was the first to perform a Corneal Transplant unofficially in 1940.

During his term as President a national qualification for ophthalmologists to be obtained by examination was organised by the College together with the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons (RACS) and Frank Sullivan, Gerard Crock, Frank Billson, Ian Constable and Fred Hollows made up the Part II Court of Examiners: reciprocity with the universities was to cease in 1978, and the Qualifications and Education Committee (QEC) sort ways of meaningful and fair assessment of performance during vocational training. Frank Billson from Melbourne was appointed as Foundation Professor at Sydney because he was knowledgeable and talented. Manpower Planning in liaison with Canada, USA and the UK was commenced; objective assessment of visual impairment was adopted and recommended to the Veterans Affairs Department; Edward Ryan's collection was catalogued for the Archives and the Museum had Geoffrey Serpell as Honorary Curator; and a Federal, State and National Aboriginal Consultative Committee progressed the National Trachoma and Eye Health Program with a surgical operative program through an Army Mobile Field Hospital.

In his Presidential Address, James McBride-White gave a 'thumb-nail' introductory sketch on the history of vision and the unsuccessful search for the origin of glasses. He then embarked upon the affliction of blindness and the need for a register of blind people in Australia as there were no accurate figures on blindness, although it was estimated that there were between 15 and 16 million blind people in the world with the main causes being trachoma, cataract, glaucoma and trauma. He advised that research into blindness is handicapped without a register because the number of blind and the cause of their blindness is mere speculation: that if accurate information was available the prevention of blindness research would be enhanced and he advocated that each State's Department of Health could collect information on blind people with a central office in Canberra, or alternatively at the College. He spoke about Trachoma being the result of poor hygiene and the effort by the College with a grant from the Commonwealth Department of Health in setting up the National Trachoma Program in trying to eradicate it under the Directorship of Fred Hollows. He also touched upon the everyday life of ophthalmologists: that restoration, maintenance, and improvement of sight is always at the fore-front of their minds.

McBride-White spoke about the different interpretations of vision and how, with suitable training, the handicap of blindness can be overcome given the necessary determination, ability and the seizing of opportunities when they present themselves, mentioning Lord Fraser, Milton and Helen Keller as examples. He reminded ophthalmologists that they are challenged to remember that they work with and for often frightened people, scared to death that they are going to become blind, each of whom is looking for comfort and re-assurance besides seeking diagnosis and treatment. He ended his talk with a quote from Kennedy who said: "Some men see things as they are and ask why? I dream of things that never were and ask why not?" He urged ophthalmologists to find time to stop and question, and ask – "Why Not?"

James enjoyed golf and gardening and was a member of the Naval and Military Club, the Melbourne Club, and the Country Golf Club.

A medal was sponsored by Dr McBride-White's family after his death. The family paid for the making of the medal and contributed to a fund for the continuation of the annual Prize which is awarded to the best Registrar's presentation at the annual RVE&E Hospital's Alumni meeting every year.