

Barry Desmond Coote, Censor-in-Chief of the Royal Australian College of Ophthalmologists, 1982 – 1987

Barry Desmond Coote, or Des as he is known, was born in New South Wales on 28 July 1930. He gained his MBBS from the University of Sydney in 1953 then studied in the UK to gain FRCS (Edin) and FRCS in 1959. On his return to Australia he was awarded Fellowship of the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons (RACS) and Membership of the Australian College of Ophthalmologists (MACO) in 1961.

Des worked as Assistant Staff Specialist at the Royal Victorian Eye and Ear Hospital from 1960 to 1975 and as Senior Staff Specialist from 1975 to 1992. He also worked as Senior Staff Specialist at the Austin Hospital from 1964 to 1990 and was made Emeritus Surgeon to both hospitals in 1993. He also ran a busy Private Practice at 20 Collins Street, Melbourne.

He served on the RACO Court of Examiners from 1978 to 1994, during which time he was Chairman of the Victorian Qualification and Education Committee. In addition to these demanding appointments, he held a teaching position at the University of Melbourne from 1976 and served as the College representative on numerous outside agencies including the Australian Post Graduate Federation of Medicine.

While he was RACO's Censor-in-Chief from 1982 to 1987, he also served as Chairman of the RACS Surgical Boards, and Inspector of Training Posts for the RACO. As Censor-in-Chief, Des was responsible for the training and education of registrars and for defining educational objectives and how to achieve them. State QEC Chairs liaised with the teaching hospitals and Training Posts were inspected for accreditation by the Inspector of Training Posts who made recommendations initially to the State QEC for consideration: recommendations were then made to the Federal QEC for required action. As a result, the College built up a numbered register of accredited Training Posts. A booklet on General Information and Regulations on Training Requirements and Examinations was published and distributed to all training institutions and made available to all intending trainees. Candidates holding the Part I Examination in Ophthalmic Basic Science were given preference for vocational training posts but recognition of vocational training did not commence until the Part I had been gained. A Trainee Register was established: all trainees who had been accepted on a training program and who had passed the Part I were required to register with the RACO in January of each year and this also provided automatic registration with the RACS. Implementation of QEC Policy encompassed Continuing Education through Workshops, Self-Assessment Programs, and Films and Television with a catalogue of video cassettes kept at the College Library at the RVEEH. A section of the Journal was also devoted to Continuing Education. The four-year vocational training program was introduced in January 1987 with flexible requirements for the fourth year with unsupervised experience, field work in remote areas and other countries, and research considered on their merits. Considerable uniformity with the OSNZ to training and examinations was achieved whilst respecting their essential individuality and special needs. The Conjoint Surgical Board in Ophthalmology between RACO and RACS continued in matters of training and assessment whilst negotiations with the RACP with a view to establishing a conjoint training program were postponed.

In 1990, Des gave the Council Lecture, in which he addressed the issue of education in ophthalmology in the nineties and where it should be heading. He forecast that the socio-economic conditions would be harsher and that health care resources would be spread more sparingly, therefore medicine could not expect easing of pressures being brought on it by the public or government. He counselled that although technology had opened frontiers, the associated costs and the advent of commercialism had threatened to jeopardise professional freedom. He addressed the notion of professionalism and that because of the large financial commitment to their training

the professions had become increasingly regulated. He pointed out that governments were interested only in the provision of skills at the lowest cost and that the professions needed to guard their standards in the continued pursuit of excellence through the medium of their colleges. He saw ophthalmologists as being isolated through the advent of day-surgeries but challenged the audience to commit emotionally, intellectually and materially to a strong, cohesive college. He advocated that the College, through State representatives, encourage young aspirants so that they developed a better relationship with the college from the beginning and therefore become a source of strength in the future. He spoke about the Part I examination and pointed out that the number of candidates passing the exam exceeded the number of jobs available. He addressed the manpower issue in relation to training and observed that the wild card was medical immigration and the role of government. However, although it was reasonable to allow limited admission of specialists, the same prevocational and vocational standards of trainees needed to be applied to them. Des saw continuing medical education as a lifelong commitment with educational responsibilities of the college not ending with the awarding of fellowships, and therefore a major challenge for the future. The activities that fellows saw as most appropriate had been established by the Moses Report but provision would have to be made for a variety of different activities with flexibility to allow fellows with different needs and different situations to select activities which were relevant to their requirements. He advised that recertification was another issue that the government was contemplating but no good method had been found to adequately judge the diversity of practice.

In 1997, with the assistance of Margaret Dunn in the College Office, he set up the National Ophthalmic Matching Program (NOMP), which brought all the States' and New Zealand's training systems into line to match first year trainee preferences to hospital employment offers. Des continued to co-ordinate the NOMP for another nine years until he retired in 2006 and handed over to Dr Ralph Higgins.

In 2000, Des was awarded the College's highest honour, the College Gold Medal, for his meritorious, selfless and distinguished service to the College through his contribution to its core activity of the training and educational program, and having influenced the development of a generation of young ophthalmologists.

Des has three children: one boy, also an ophthalmologist, Associate Professor Michael Coote, and two girls.

In his spare time, Des was a member of Balwyn Rotary Club from 1978 to 1984 and the Melbourne Rotary Club from 1984 to 1986. Being a man of many talents, Des farmed Macadamia nuts at Gympie in Queensland. He enjoys yachting, skiing, golfing, and scuba diving, and is a member of the South Pacific Underwater Medicine Society.