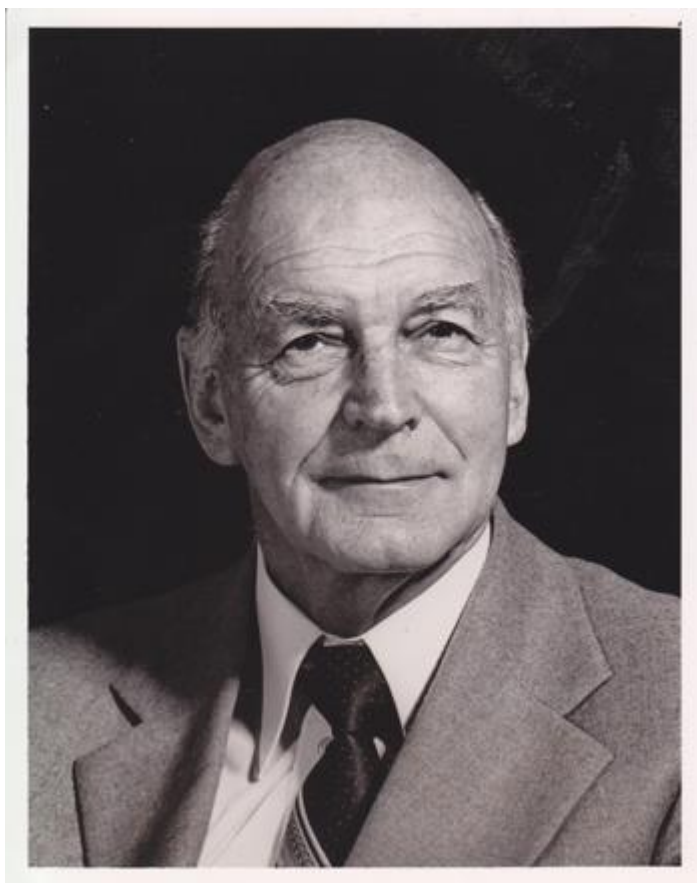


## Calvin Ring



Charles Calvin Ring (1916-1998) was the most influential and dedicated ophthalmologist in Auckland in the second half of the twentieth century. At the Otago Medical School he made friends with two other Aucklanders who also achieved subsequent prominence, William Manchester (later Sir William), and Fred Moody, who later became superintendent of Middlemore Hospital and Chairman of the Auckland Hospital Board. All three friends, like so many of New Zealand's young men and women, went to serve in the Second World War, and Ring and Manchester were together in both Egypt and Italy.

When Ring first saw William A. Fairclough performing eye surgery at Auckland Hospital he knew that ophthalmology was for him. He stayed a third year as a junior doctor and acted as a registrar in ophthalmology and ENT. When World War Two broke out he joined the New Zealand Medical Corps. At times in Egypt he assisted Howard Coverdale, a senior colleague and also an Aucklander, with eye operations. In Italy he was with the 22<sup>nd</sup> Battalion where he was mentioned in dispatches, and he was present at the time of the invasion in 1943 and saw front line action. Ring rose to the rank of Major.

Calvin first met his future wife Joan as a student in Dunedin and subsequently they found themselves together in both Egypt and Italy, where Joan was a nurse. They were married just before the end of the war and their move to England. Their first son Peter, now a senior Auckland ophthalmologist, was born in London in 1946.

It did not take Ring long to secure one of the sought-after positions as a house surgeon at Moorfields Eye Hospital. He became the Senior House Officer which was a position of responsibility respected by the senior surgeons. He described the cataract operation of the

day as being a rapid extra-capsular procedure using the Graefe knife, under local anaesthetic with cocaine crystals. Glaucoma operations were accomplished using a cornea-scleral trephine.

When Ring returned to Auckland in 1948 the two eye surgeons at Auckland Hospital were Graeme Talbot and Cecil Pittar. Ring, being the junior surgeon before the days of registrars, had to do the emergency work. At the same time, Ring began private practice in Alfred Street, which is now incorporated in the city campus of the University of Auckland. The house belonged to Sir Carrick Robertson, a pioneer Auckland surgeon. Sir Carrick's son David, a neurosurgeon and good friend of Ring, offered to share a consulting suite in his father's house.

Ring described his early days in private practice as being reasonably competitive. The others in active practice were Fairclough, Talbot, Pittar, and Goldstein, although Goldstein had a smaller practice. An early break came for Ring when Fairclough invited him to apply for his position at the Mater Misericordiae Hospital when he retired. At that time the Mater Hospital had its own nursing school and had public beds. This enabled private patients who required surgery but could not afford private surgery to be admitted to the Mater Hospital as a non-fee paying patients. Although the surgeon did not get paid, it did enable the surgeon to continue caring for his own patient rather than have the care taken over entirely by the public hospital system. However these free beds disappeared when the Mercy Hospital nurses training school ceased in the late 1970s. Ring, although not a Roman Catholic himself greatly admired the dedication of the Sisters of Mercy and their very high nursing standards.

Calvin Ring's great contributions to ophthalmology were in the areas of education and surgery. He gave unstinting service to the public system until the then mandatory retirement age of sixty-five. Every week for half an hour before his busy clinic, he gave a teaching ward round on his patients for the benefit of the nurses, house surgeons, and registrars. He would always have prepared tutorial which related to one or two of his patients. His surgical standards were very high and he expected the same of his registrars. 'If you take your eye off the eye, take the instrument off the eye' was a one-liner remembered by many trainees. In 1978 Ring founded the Auckland Eye Research and Education Trust. Initially the Trust raised funds from business houses, but in the longer term, the Trust was maintained by donations from patients. Every patient discharged from the eye ward at Auckland Hospital was given an envelope containing a letter and a circular, to encourage them to donate. The funds accumulated were used for education, such as supporting ophthalmic nurses to attend conferences, and registrars to travel to Australia for educational purposes. Later, when the

University of Auckland Chair in Ophthalmology was being planned, Ring and the trustees decided that when the Chair was established the residual funds should support it.

Ring was also involved in overseas ophthalmic education. He joined Dr Bignall from Melbourne to work in Thailand where he went on three occasions. He also joined the Asia-Pacific Academy of Ophthalmology which was started in 1960 by Dr John Holmes of Hawaii and Dr Ocampo from the Philippines. This Academy grew to include thirty nations and became recognized internationally. It held conferences every four years in a different country. Its 1971 meeting was a grand affair in Auckland when Dr George Fenwick was the President of the Academy, and Chairman of the Conference. Ring became President of the Asia-Pacific Academy at the time of the 1990 meeting in Kyoto, Japan, at which thirty-five countries were represented. As many were developing countries, prevention of blindness was a particularly important issue for the Academy.

Ring's surgical skills allowed him to be more intrepid than most of his colleagues. Thus he was a natural to pioneer the use of intra-ocular lenses in New Zealand. He was not the first. That honour belongs to Dr Grant Johnston of Hamilton. But Ring was the first to produce good long-term results. At the time, in the mid 1970s, intra-ocular lenses had a poor reputation. This was partly because of Peter Choyce at the London Hospital in the United Kingdom, who persisted in using lenses which gave indifferent results, and many had to be removed. Ring met Lawton Smith, the famous neuro-ophthalmologist from the Bascom Palmer Eye Institute in Miami, Florida, who advised not to give up on the idea but to visit Cornelius Binkhorst in Holland, which Ring did with his son Peter in 1974. He then visited Norman Jaffe in Miami, accompanied by Bruce Hadden who was training at the Bascom Palmer Eye Institute at the time. Jaffe was performing extra-capsular extractions with irido-capsular supported intra-ocular lenses. Ring returned to New Zealand and began this technique with good results. Unfortunately, Ring's results were regarded sceptically by colleagues, and he was subjected to considerable opprobrium. Ring gave his first paper on the technique in 1978 and heard hisses from the back of the room. He was professionally ostracised especially by South Island colleagues, and most vocally by the articulate Roy Holmes. However they were ostracising Ring in ignorance, not realizing the huge difference between extra-capsular extraction with iris-clip lenses, and the technique of intra-capsular extraction and anterior chamber lenses used by Peter Choyce. Intra-ocular lens surgery was well established for many years before the Christchurch surgeons finally adopted it, at a time when they were becoming increasingly criticized for denying their patients the benefits of modern techniques.

Ring subscribed to six ophthalmic journals and Scientific American, all of which he read. In 1991 he predicted that the future of ophthalmology lay in refractive corneal surgery, and in retinal advances, in particular the treatment of macular degeneration, and within a decade he was correct on both counts. New Zealand's first ophthalmologist trained in the country to fellowship standard, Dr Ian Elliott, was advised to transfer from Dunedin to Auckland for his last year, mainly to have the benefit of Ring's tutelage, even although there was no academic department in Auckland at that time.

In a city that often seems as close knit as a village, Ring had influential friends, in particular Sir Woolf Fisher and Maurice Paykel, joint founders of Fisher and Paykel Limited. Another was Sir William Stevenson. With Ring's encouragement, Stevenson supported the establishment of the academic Department of Ophthalmology at the University of Auckland. Years later, Maurice Paykel endowed the Foundation Chair of Ophthalmology, the Foundation Professor being Charles McGhee who took up the appointment in 1999.

Ophthalmology was Ring's life and love. His avocation was horse racing, which would have been implanted by his father who was a veterinary surgeon with special interest in equine work. Ring loved horses and he loved the characters in the racing industry. He described racing people in Auckland as being city slickers and in the provinces as being just great guys. As a medical professional he never felt out of place amongst the racing fraternity as he related to it so knowledgeably. He became a steward at the Auckland Racing Club, then a committee member, and finally President of the Auckland Racing Club, which he gave up in 1986.

Ring was of course very proud that Peter, the oldest of his three sons became an ophthalmologist. They practised together and both said they never had an argument. Calvin Ring continued consulting until just a few months before his passing in 1998.