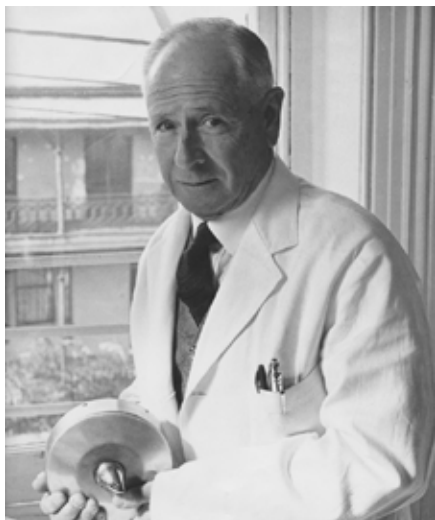


# RANZCO Museum

## HUGH HEDLEY SKEOCH: ELECTRO-MAGNET PIONEER



*Hugh H Skeoch holds a pioneering electro-magnet for removing foreign bodies*

**Hugh Hedley Skeoch was an innovator in ophthalmic trauma who developed electromagnets and designed the trial frame that bears his name. His son Andrew generously donated a huge prototype electromagnet designed by his father to the RANZCO Museum and has penned the tribute to his father below. A history of management of Intraocular Foreign Body (IOFB) and magnets will be part of the Museum exhibit at RANZCO Congress in Melbourne this November.**

***Dr David Kaufman***  
***Curator, RANZCO Museum***

My father, Hugh Hedley Skeoch, was born in 1895, the son of a marine engineer from Glasgow. My father's family never envisaged Hugh becoming a doctor. However, one of his school teachers approached my grandfather with the proposition that he thought Hugh had the ability to get into

university, if they would consent to him being coached. My father won the first scholarship to study medicine at Sydney University, graduating in 1918. He immediately enrolled in the Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force, and was posted to New Guinea, where Australian administration had replaced the German colonies. He took over the tiny hospital in Madang, a collection of huts under coconut palms.

Back in Australia, Hugh set up a general practice in the rural community of Dorrigo, on the NSW north coast. There is a photograph of him in his twenties on a horse, medical bag at his side, and pet terrier in his top pocket. However, the rural doctor's life was not for him. I'm told he got weary of being called out at all hours to deliver babies on remote properties. He spent several years taking successive contracts as doctor on merchant ships travelling to exotic locations in Africa and the Pacific.

Eventually he decided that the only way to further his skills was to study in London. He arrived in the late 1920s, originally with the intention to specialise in gynaecology. The anecdote goes that as he was registering for courses, a colleague asked him why he was interested in gynaecology explaining that: "You only have one gender of patient between certain ages and invariably get called out in the small hours of the morning". Dad's response was to ask: "Well, what then?" He was advised: "Eyes! You get patients of all ages, and get to sleep at night." So dad went into eyes. I don't know a lot about this period of his career apart from the fact that he gained his FRCS in 1931 and DOMS in 1936, and worked at Moorfields Eye Hospital from 1933, becoming a registrar in 1938.

He was also a consultant and surgeon at other London hospitals

including Western Ophthalmological and Edgeware General Hospital. With the outbreak of the Second World War, dad wanted to join the Australian forces, but instead was required to join the Royal Army Medical Corps. He was in London during the blitz, narrowly escaping death several times. He was then posted as a Major to North Africa and Italy, following the advancing troops and managing the field hospitals. I think he was the supervising officer in Naples for some time. Returning to London and civilian life, my father picked up where he'd left off, continuing as registrar at Moorfields, with consulting rooms in Harley Street. He married my mother, also an Australian, in 1953. When I came along in 1959, I think the call of the gum trees and the prospect of being able to impart some of his skills back in his homeland led to my family returning to Sydney in 1962.

It was his experience during the war, of soldiers with shrapnel and foreign body wounds to the eye that inspired dad to develop his electro-magnet. He envisaged a portable, lightweight unit that could be hand-held and controlled with a foot switch. I don't know how much of an advance this was, but I gather that the fixed magnetic apparatus available at the time was pretty medieval. Back in London after the war, he collaborated with engineers and had several prototypes built. My father was never someone to blow his own trumpet. He was innovative, thorough and pragmatic, perfecting surgical procedures and various technologies. He developed the trial frame that bears his name and also did pioneering work on bee stings to the eye and intra-ocular lenses. I know he was regarded highly by his patients and immediate colleagues.

***Andrew Skeoch***