

Profile of President Nitin Verma 2020 – 2022

Dr Nitin Verma is the first Specialist International Medical Graduate (S-MIG) to sit on the RANZCO Board. After eight years on the Board, in June 2020, Clinical Professor Nitin Verma was elected President by the RANZCO Council and at the October Council meeting that year he took over as President from Clinical Associate Professor Heather Mack.

Nitin Verma was born into a family of Professional Engineers but he developed an interest in Medicine instead. He commenced his ophthalmology training in 1981 at the Dr RP Centre for Ophthalmic Sciences at the All-India Institute for Medical Sciences in New Delhi. There, all clinical facilities, pathology, pharmacology, microbiology, and research laboratories were under one roof and Registrars, Fellows and faculty were all full-time employees of the centre. As all subspecialties were being practised within the institution the training was comprehensive and there seemed to be little risk of missing out on any area of the curriculum: the final exams entailed live surgery. As trainees, they lived together, studied together, helped each other in many ways and were socially close for the duration of their training, making a fertile ground for life-long friends. However, there was a great focus on outreach programs and everyone was taught to conduct outreach safely, to address the issues of equity, access, and affordability.

Having qualified as an Ophthalmologist in 1983, Nitin worked for two years for his Fellowship in Germany where he carried out research on silicon IOLs. After obtaining his German Ophthalmic degree, Nitin returned to India but then moved on to Papua New Guinea where he established an eye health program with post graduate teaching in 1994. In 1997 he moved to Darwin where he worked at the Royal Darwin Hospital. Here he ran the Aboriginal Eye Program in the Top End and went through the process of assessment for recognition as a S-MIG in Australia. He became a Fellow of the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Ophthalmologists (FRANZCO) in 2000.

Nitin was active in the Tasmanian branch of RANZCO as the Secretary and Chair of the branch. He has organised most of the branch meetings over the past two decades including two national Annual Scientific Congresses of RANZCO, in 2005 and in 2013.

Dr Verma founded the East Timor Eye Program in 2000 and over 22 years has developed it into the national Eye Service in Timor Leste. The Program has trained 13 ophthalmologists, nurses, and other cadres of eye health professionals. Along with its partners, the East Timor Eye Program has set up the appropriate infrastructure in Dili and the districts. The program is in its final stages of handover in 2022-2023 and is recognised as one of the most successful health programs in Timor Leste. Dr Verma's 'family' of volunteers continue to support the program in many ways. Through his long involvement with this program, Dr Verma was appointed the Honorary Consul for Timor Leste in Tasmania in 2007 and he continues in the role even today. He is the longest serving Consul for Timor Leste in Australia

Dr Verma became a member of the S-IMG committee in 2007 and has mentored numerous overseas trained Fellows as well as RANZCO trainees. Nitin has also been a member of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander committee and has had extensive involvement in overseas training programs including the East Timor Eye Program.

Dr Verma has long been active in Ophthalmic International Development in the Asia-Pacific area. He organised International Development Workshops on the Fridays prior to the RANZCO Congresses, involving participants from SE Asia, Timor Leste, the Pacific Islands, and Papua New Guinea. The RANZCO International Scholarship Program, which aims to contribute to the professional development of ophthalmologists, support peer-to-peer networking, and create linkages between RANZCO and society in the Asia-Pacific region, evolved out of these workshops. In November 2006 Dr Verma was awarded the RANZCO Distinguished Service Award for his significant contribution to ophthalmology, particularly in overseas and remote communities. He has received many other awards in recognition of his service to ophthalmology over the years including the Order of Australia and the Order of Timor-Leste in 2010.

In 2017 Associate Professor Verma was invested as Commander into The Most Venerable Order of the Hospital of St John of Jerusalem to Chair the recently announced formation of the Asia-Pacific Branch of the St John Ophthalmic Association (SOA). The Asia-Pacific Branch of the SOA joined the United Kingdom and North American Priorities in partnering with the St John of Jerusalem Eye Hospital Group to increase its capacity to save sight and restore lives through training, research, mentoring, teaching programs and staff appointments.

Clinical Professor Verma specialises in General Ophthalmology, Cataract, Oculoplastic, Glaucoma and Medical Retina and is based at Hobart Eye Surgeons. He heads several research projects concerning new treatments for AMD as well as diabetic macular oedema. He is involved with the Keep Sight reminder program and advocates for a coordinated, integrated, and funded screening program for diabetic eye care.

On becoming President, one of his biggest aspirations was to harness the collective will, intellect and grit of the RANZCO membership to advance equity in eye care. On being questioned about getting things done he indicated that a collaborative approach of working together rather than outright delegation allowed access to expertise that one may not have. Nitin noted that due to the Covid-19 pandemic, making use of the Virtual World enabled more efficient collaboration through Zoom meetings, and Google docs. This was brought about by sharing ideas as they arose and collaborating 'on the go' through smaller and more frequent meetings. This attribute ultimately increased the agility of the College and led to the creation of amazing work such as the Vision 2030 and Beyond plan. However, he found that in advocacy matters with MPs, bureaucrats and technocrats, a face-to-face meeting had depth of communication which was lost in Zoom calls.

The big issue Nitin has seen throughout his career is the gap in equity and access within health systems where some communities are afforded resources while others are not. He was passionate about addressing this and it would become the central focus of his Presidency. He knew that it would take a wholistic approach to community care through education, systems, people, and resources. The philosophy that guided him was that of caring for the patient and giving back to society: that ophthalmology is a component of community and societal wellbeing rather than just eyes. He attributes his ability to work with so many people to achieve the outcomes that have been achieved is to stand by what you say and to empathise through communicating on different levels, depending on who you are talking to.

Under Nitin's Presidency RANZCO launched a Sustainability Charter with the formation of a Sustainability Committee and encouraged members to familiarise themselves with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). He pointed out that Governments all over the world have policies and agreements in place but many problems resist solution because of unsustainable practices which are deeply entrenched. Examples of these in ophthalmology put forward by Nitin are:

1. the waste produced from a day-to-day practice such as cataract operation and that RANZCO could engage with industry to work out more environmentally friendly solutions;
2. the wellbeing and health of the staff, students, and trainees as well as patients by stamping out bullying, harassment, and gender inequality; and
3. the impact on expenditure as well as pollution, of information technology, using Zoom meetings, telehealth, and tele-consultation, which have reduced the need for people to travel.

Nitin sees the adoption of information technology as the key to sustainable development.

On reflection of his two years as RANZCO President Professor Nitin Verma was proud of the progress the College had made in developing and launching a new Vocational Training Program (VTP); increasing the focus on the importance of sustainability, health, and wellbeing; the launch of 'Vision 2030 and Beyond'; progress in RANZCO's Reconciliation Action Plan in Australia, and the imminent launch of a Māori Action Plan in New Zealand. In achieving this progress, he expressed his gratitude and appreciation of the support he had received from the College Fellows and RANZCO Staff

Professor Verma lives with his wife Anu in Hobart and is the proud father of two lovely daughters. His hobby is woodwork and has a well-equipped workshop with the necessary tools and supply of specialty timbers collected from Tasmania. In his assessment the best part of woodturning is the attention to detail and the continual quest to improve: the total concentration allows one to escape many of the issues that occupy the mind.