RANZCO Eye Museum

Robert Elliot: Ophthalmologist, Innovator, Administrator and Magician

On a recent visit to the Government Eye Hospital in Chennai, formerly the Madras Eye Hospital, as a guest of the All-India Ophthalmological Society, I was struck by the legacy preserved within its walls. Founded in 1819, the hospital houses the Elliot Eye Museum, which contains remarkable reconstructions of facial and eye diseases, as well as an extraordinary archive of patient records from colonial times when bacterial infection and evisceration were commonplace.

Prof Robert Elliot, born in England in 1864, led a life that combined medical achievement with a flair for the unusual. After graduating, he was awarded a fellowship of the Royal College of Surgeons, receiving multiple prizes along the way. He soon travelled to India where he entered the Indian Medical Service, serving on the Northwest Frontier before being appointed Superintendent of the Government Eye Hospital in Madras. The hospital, originally established as a trachoma institution shortly after the opening of Moorfields in London, provided the stage for Elliot's most enduring innovation.

In the early 19th century, glaucoma was treated almost exclusively with the Graefe iridectomy. The first attempts at filtering surgery were undertaken by LaGrange, who created a large sclerectomy combined with iridectomy, though the procedure was often complicated by hypotony and bleb leakage. In 1909, while working in Madras, Elliot refined this technique. Using a small trephine, he created a fistula 1.5 to 2 millimetres in size beneath a flap of peripheral cornea and conjunctiva. Initially, the trephines were rotated by hand, later briefly mechanised through the Greens clockwork trephine.

Elliot's procedure quickly gained widespread acceptance as a treatment for glaucoma and remained in use until the 1940s, although complications such as hypotony, cataract and late bleb infection were not uncommon. In 1915, he returned to England, where he became a lecturer at the London School of Tropical Medicine and continued to practise ophthalmology in London until his death in 1936.

During his time in India, Elliot also pursued a strong interest in snake envenomation. He collaborated with Sir Thomas Fraser in Edinburgh on research into the action of snake venom, though despite their efforts, they were unable to develop a practical antidote.

Beyond his medical career, Elliot had a lifelong fascination with conjuring. He was an accomplished magician and served as chairman of the Occult Committee of the Magic Circle in London for many years. Unlike his enthusiasm for stage magic, however, he remained sceptical of purported Indian magical cures and tricks.

David Kaufman,
RANZCO Eye Museum Curator

Government Eye Hospital

Greens' clockwork trephine

Elliot's trephines

Part 2 of the McAllister Collection will be available at the 2025 RANZCO Congress in Melbourne!

Visit the RANZCO Eye Museum Booth in the Trade Hall to experience rare and intriguing displays, including:

- Exquisite mechanical instruments from the 19th century
- The evolution of glaucoma tonometry
- Surgical lighting from candle and oil

Don't miss the extensive exhibition of historical posters showcased in the Museum and adjacent Seniors Lounge — all competing for the prestigious Jim Martin Prizes.

Join us at the Senior Fellows lounge for interesting lunch time talks about the Atlas of ophthalmoscopes, Imaging the world and An eye for painting.

Are you already a friend of the museum? Email **museum@ranzco.edu** for museum updates.

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