Dr Barry Desmond Coote

Censor-in-Chief of the Royal Australian College of Ophthalmologists (1982–1987)

Dr Barry Desmond Coote, known as Des, served as RANZCO Censor-in-Chief from 1982 to 1987 and was a major figure in strengthening registrar training, assessment and accreditation systems.

Born in New South Wales on 28 July 1930, Dr Coote graduated MBBS from the University of Sydney in 1953. He undertook further training in the United Kingdom, gaining FRCS (Edinburgh) and FRCS in 1959. On returning to Australia, he was awarded Fellowship of the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons and Membership of the Australian College of Ophthalmologists in 1961.

Des held long-term specialist appointments in Victoria, serving at the Royal Victorian Eye and Ear Hospital from 1960 to 1992 (Assistant Staff Specialist to 1975 then Senior Staff Specialist to 1992) and at the Austin Hospital from 1964 to 1990. He was appointed Emeritus Surgeon to both hospitals in 1993 and also ran a busy private practice at 20 Collins Street, Melbourne. He taught at the University of Melbourne from 1976 and represented the College on a range of external bodies, including the Australian Post Graduate Federation of Medicine.

Within the College, Des served on the Court of Examiners from 1978 to 1994 and chaired the Victorian Qualification and Education Committee. As Censor-in-Chief from 1982 to 1987, he also chaired surgical boards within RACS and served as Inspector of Training Posts. His portfolio centred on registrar education and on clarifying educational objectives and how they would be achieved. Under his leadership, training posts were inspected for accreditation through a structured process involving State and Federal QECs and the College developed a numbered register of accredited training posts. A training regulations booklet was produced and distributed to training institutions and prospective trainees.

Key developments during this period included tighter alignment between examinations and training progression. Candidates who had passed the Part I Basic Science examination were given preference for vocational training posts and vocational training was not recognised until Part I was completed. A formal Trainee Register was introduced, requiring eligible trainees to register annually, with linked registration through RACS. Continuing education was expanded through workshops, self-assessment programs and the development of audio-visual resources, including a video catalogue held at the College library, with a journal section also devoted to continuing education.

In January 1987, the vocational training program was extended to four years, with flexible options for the fourth year such as unsupervised experience, remote or overseas field work and research where appropriate. During his tenure, considerable uniformity with

Ophthalmology Society of New Zealand training and examinations was achieved while respecting local needs.

In 1990, Des delivered the Council Lecture, reflecting on ophthalmic education in the 1990s. He warned that socio-economic pressures would intensify, health resources would be tighter and governments would focus on delivering skills at the lowest cost, making it essential that colleges protect standards in pursuit of excellence. He emphasised professionalism, the impact of technology and commercial pressures and the need for a cohesive College, including stronger engagement of trainees from the outset. He also addressed workforce and training supply issues, including the mismatch between candidates passing Part I and available jobs, and noted medical immigration as a significant variable. He viewed continuing medical education as a lifelong obligation and identified re-certification as a looming challenge, while acknowledging the difficulty of assessing diverse practice.

Des continued shaping training nationally beyond his Censor-in-Chief term. In 1997, he established the National Ophthalmic Matching Program (NOMP), aligning state and New Zealand systems to match first-year trainee preferences with hospital offers. He coordinated NOMP for nine years until retiring in 2006, handing over to Dr Ralph Higgins. In 2000, he received the College Gold Medal, the College's highest honour, recognising meritorious, selfless and distinguished service, particularly his impact on education and the development of young ophthalmologists.

Des had three children, including A/Prof Michael Coote, also an ophthalmologist. Outside medicine he was active in Rotary, farmed macadamias at Gympie in Queensland and enjoyed yachting, skiing, golf and scuba diving, with membership of the South Pacific Underwater Medicine Society.