Prof Frank A. Billson AO

Censor-in-Chief of the Australian College of Ophthalmologists (1978–1982)

In 1977, Prof Frank Billson, a Melbourne-trained ophthalmologist, was appointed Foundation Professor of Clinical Ophthalmology at the University of Sydney. Already an active College Fellow, he went on to shape the College's education, standards and public standing through decades of service. He later became Emeritus Professor of Clinical Ophthalmology at the University of Sydney.

Prof Billson was educated at Melbourne Church of England Grammar School and graduated in medicine from the University of Melbourne in 1958. After working at The Alfred Hospital, he travelled to England and gained a Diploma in Ophthalmology in London in 1962. His surgical fellowships followed: Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons Edinburgh (1965), the Royal College of Surgeons London (1966) and the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons (1966). He became a Fellow of the Australian College of Ophthalmologists in 1975 and, when the College received Royal assent in 1978, became a Fellow of the Royal Australian College of Ophthalmologists. His international recognition included Fellowship of the American College of Surgeons (1977) and Fellowship of the American Academy of Ophthalmology (1978).

Frank's College contribution spanned education, governance and leadership. He served on the Qualification and Education Committee (QEC), Editorial Committee and Council, held office as Censor-in-Chief and later served as President (1987–1988). He also contributed to the Orthoptic Board of Australia. Alongside College service, his work in basic ophthalmic research and his commitment to outreach in under-resourced settings, particularly Bangladesh and later East Timor, strengthened the College's reputation.

His wider community and sector leadership was extensive. He was Foundation Director of the Save Sight Institute in Sydney and served on boards including the Save Sight Institute and the Ophthalmic Research Institute of Australia. He was Director of the Lions NSW Eye Bank and held roles with organisations supporting blindness prevention, eye health education and professional collaboration in Australia and internationally. His hospital and training roles included chairing Sydney Eye Hospital's registrar training and development committees and serving as Consultant Ophthalmologist at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital and Sydney Children's Hospital.

Frank's most influential work for the College came during his term as Censor-in-Chief from 1978 to 1982, a period in which he drove clearer structures for education, training and assessment. He brought deep examination expertise to the role through service with the conjoint exam system alongside the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons, including examiner responsibilities and chairing the Surgical Board (Ophthalmology).

Within the College, his years on QEC helped establish a strong principle that remains relevant: the College's core purpose is education at academic, clinical and ethical levels, spanning medical undergraduates, registrars, ophthalmologists and general practitioners.

During these years, QEC was formalised into three streams: Qualifications, Examinations, and Continuing Education, to sharpen focus and accountability. Survey feedback from Fellows highlighted concern about undergraduate ophthalmic training and the quality of referrals from general practice, prompting a stronger College commitment to undergraduate education and practical continuing education for GPs through regular state-based seminars and collaboration with the RACGP.

Training standards and oversight were strengthened. Registrar training was reviewed, including consideration of broader subspecialty exposure and the potential value of extending training. State QECs were given greater responsibility for organising and supervising training, including oversight of training post numbers and distribution. Coordinated training with Ophthalmology Society of New Zealand was advanced, with reciprocity of training posts and trainee interchange. The conjoint final examinations were further formalised through shared written papers and examiner participation across Australia and New Zealand.

Eligibility for Fellowship was clarified and tightened. Successful candidates at the conjoint final examination were required to complete six years of full-time training posts, comprising three years of pre-vocational training and three years of ophthalmology training. In 1980, the College commenced systematic inspections of training posts, with a three-year inspection cycle and clear differentiation between training posts and service posts where standards were not met. The College also affirmed minimum entry requirements for candidates, based on recognised basic medical qualifications, and took a firmer stance on overseas qualification concessions, narrowing exemptions and strengthening accreditation expectations.

Continuing education was expanded beyond the annual congress to include refresher courses, seminars and self-assessment programs, spaced across the year and held in varied locations to maximise access. The College's library and educational resources were strengthened, including the development of an AAO educational tape collection. A philosophy around re-certification was developed, reflecting early attention to ongoing professional assurance.

Finally, the College's external role was broadened. It agreed it should be seen to lead national and international blindness prevention efforts, including involvement in trachoma-related initiatives. It also supported stronger ophthalmic research capacity in Australia, encouraging industry and philanthropy to fund research through structures that could be organised and overseen by the College, including the concept of an ophthalmic foundation.

Frank's later presidency from 1987 to 1988 built on this foundation. Across academic leadership, community service and College reform, he remains closely associated with

strengthening education systems, clarifying standards and lifting the College’s profile among its peers.