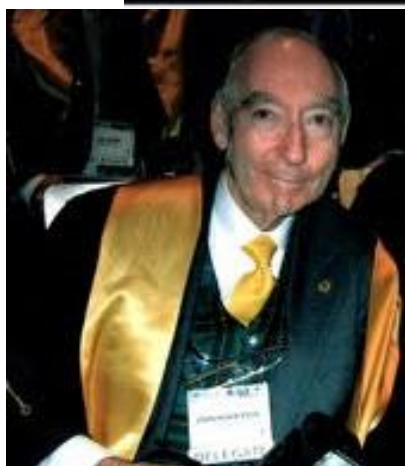
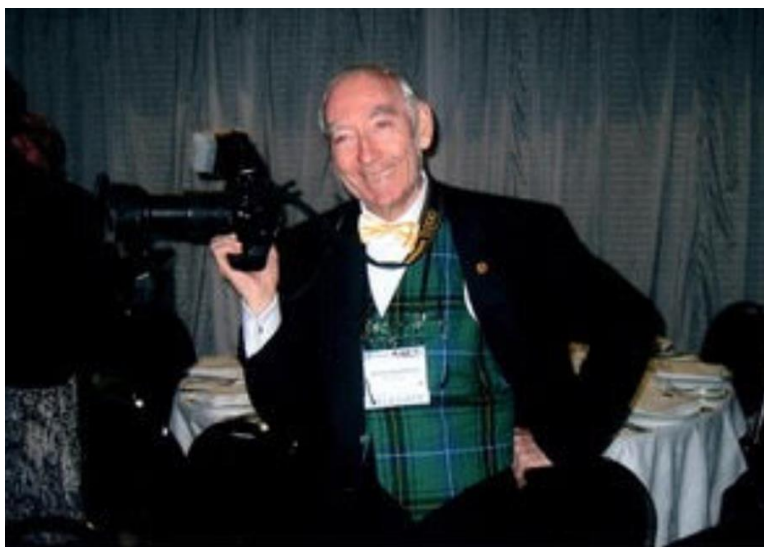


OBITUARY

Dr John Aloysius Henderson
Victorian General Surgeon
26 AUGUST 1932 – 5 MAY 2025



John Henderson was a remarkable individual and surgeon whose interests are well described (by his youngest child, Michael) through the letter P: *Partner to Pam* (née Currigan) for 55 years, a *Parent* of four children (Mary, David, Jane and Michael), a *Photographer* who documented many major events of Australasian surgery over 40 years, an accomplished and trained *Pianist*, a *Pilot* (from 1966) who owned his own *Plane* (from 1976), and renowned for his remarkable *Penmanship*, producing handwritten notes and messages calligraphed in beautiful black ink using one of his collection of stylish *Pens*. The word *Polymath* also comes to mind, because over the course of his 92 years, he succeeded in such a wide range of fields. Unlike some polymaths he was also a good bloke, respectful and kind to those he met. Pam describes him as “*a true gentleman, a gentle man and loyal, somewhat eccentric, yet self-effacing, even shy, preferring to hide behind the camera which was his tool to record every possible event!*”

John was born in Gundagai and was educated in both New South Wales and Victoria. He was educated at St Joseph's Convent School, Quirindi, NSW (1937-43), from Prep to Grade 6, and credited the Sisters of St Joseph for his love of copperplate handwriting. Although he won a bursary to Armadale Catholic College, his parents sent him to St Patrick's College in East Melbourne for year 7 where he lived with his grandparents. They encouraged him to practise piano for an hour every evening. His favourite piece was Chopin, Nocturne 2 Op9 in E flat major [which was played as background music at his funeral]. For his final four years of school, he boarded at St Ignatius College, Riverview, Sydney [In those days, year 11 was the final, matriculation year]. He matriculated with the school prize for music and honours in history. As he was too young (16), he had to wait a year before entering the University of Melbourne to study medicine. His family had by then moved to Geelong, so he attended the Gordon Institute of Technology, completing 3 years of physics in one year, whilst also studying [and passing] biochemistry and maths.

He entered Newman College for his six years of medical studies, graduating in 1955. During his university career he continued his piano studies. He also took up middle distance running, gaining a full blue in athletics in his final year, with his best time for 800m (880 yards) being 1:56min [Only 8-9 seconds behind the winning time at the 1956 Melbourne Olympics which was 1:47.7). He also represented the University at Table Tennis.

Following graduation he was an intern (RMO) at St Vincents Hospital, Melbourne (1956), then a Senior RMO in Geelong (1957), the Royal Women's Hospital (1958) and the Royal Children's Hospital (1959). He entered General Practice (1961-66), including working for two years (1963-65) as a MO to the Repatriation Artificial Limb and Appliance Centre in South Melbourne. before deciding to become a surgeon, training at the Alfred Hospital (1966), St Vincents Hospital, Melbourne (1967) and Mont Park (1968-69). He then travelled to the United Kingdom in 1970 as a ship's surgeon, where he undertook surgical registrar locums whilst undertaking full-time courses to prepare for his English Fellowship, passing the primary in 1971, and his final FRCS in May 1972. He passed his FRACS back in Australia later that year (1972), then returned to the UK to complete a trinity of Fellowships in Edinburgh (1973). Whilst at St Margaret's Hospital, Epping, UK (Feb 1973), he filmed an original operation for carpal instability by orthopaedic surgeon, Geoffrey Fisk. Decades later John's detailed logbook of all his photography provided the critical evidence that Fisk had performed the operation years before those whose descriptions later claimed pre-eminence.¹

Returning to Australia, he was appointed to the Geelong Hospital in 1973, where he worked as a Visiting Medical Officer until his retirement in 2000. He also operated at the St John of God Hospital in Geelong from 1976-2000. He ran a medicolegal practice from 1980 – 2021, writing his reports in stylish copperplate handwriting "for the judge", and always in black ink. His somewhat flamboyant but perfect penmanship was, and is, somewhat unusual for a doctor. He took a great interest in people and their history, so found that many patients whom he examined expressed their gratitude that "finally someone had just listened to them."

His favourite colour was yellow, one he could recognise despite being brown-green colour blind, so he often wore yellow on his ties, caps and shirts; he and Pam owned a yellow Mercedes 200 SLK sports car, planted a frangipani in the back yard and John must have enjoyed the yellow/gold that adorns the RACS gown! His love of flying may have begun when, in his mother's arms, he was the youngest ever passenger to be flown by Kingsford Smith. He even placed a yellow stripe on his plane which he used to fly to many surgical meetings and to take the family all around Australia.

From 1981, John began to create photographic records of the Annual Meetings of the Provincial Surgeons of Australia (PSA). He generously provided, at his own expense, spare copies of his photographs for delegates to enjoy and archive at the following year's meetings. From 1996, at the

¹ Burke FD, Heras-Palou C. Geoffrey Fisk and a hitherto unknown contribution to the treatment of carpal instability. J Hand Surg Euro 35E (9) :754-6.

request of Councillor Peter King, he compiled photographic records of the RACS Annual Scientific Congress, a service that extended for more than 25 years. Other College events such as the bi-annual Cowlshaw Symposia were also included. In 2006, he received a certificate of outstanding service from RACS for his contributions to the history of the College. His photographs have been archived in albums and later, digitally, on CD/DVD and are stored in the RACS Archives. In 2016, he was awarded the RACS Medal for “his meritorious contribution in the development of a permanent photographic record of the events of the College”. Some of his photographs were included in Wyn Beasley’s *Mantle of Surgery*, and no doubt the College’s centenary in 2027 will also see further reproductions of John’s careful and meticulous artistry. He is survived by Pam (née Currigan), four children (Mary, David, Jane and Michael), and eight grandchildren.

This obituary was prepared by Professor David Watters AM OBE and approved by Mrs Pam Henderson.