



Gordon Low

Celebrating 80 years

As the College prepares to celebrate 80 years, here is a look at how the Foundation Fellows came to our name

IN FEBRUARY WE celebrate the 80th birthday of this College. Our story began in 1920, and our forefathers took seven long years of hard work to reach their goal. Another four years elapsed before we received our present name. We are today indeed proud inheritors of a rich legacy.

“Throughout the period to 1920, and for some years afterward, most doctors were ‘occasional operators’... Major surgery was commonly undertaken by general practitioners with no special surgical expertise... This situation was compounded by the widespread practice of fee splitting ... There was no official body to control the situation...”

This was the condition of the practice of surgery in Australia and in New Zealand about 100 years ago, as recorded by Andrew Newton in his thesis *The History of the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons from Foundation to 1935*. It is against this background that the surgeons of both countries were moving for change 87 years ago.

In February 1920, Louis Barnett, the Professor of Surgery at the University of Otago in Dunedin, gave the first indication that a number of surgeons wished to form a body distinct from other medical practitioners. His initial move was to propose the formation of a New Zealand Association of Surgeons. He also had a concurrent proposal for an Australasian surgical association.

In autumn of that year, members of the surgical staff of the Melbourne, the Alfred and St. Vincent’s Hospitals, formed the *Surgical Association of Melbourne*. Membership was only open to the senior surgical staff of these hospitals, and limited to 50. It was independent of the BMA. It was also a “closed shop” and its proceedings were not reported to any one. The first president was F.D. Bird and the vice-presidents were Hamilton Russell, Alfred Hospital, and George Syme,

Melbourne Hospital. Across the Tasman, New Zealand surgeons who were disenchanted with the BMA supported the formation of this surgical body. When a few Victorian country surgeons were admitted as members, it became known as the *Victorian Association of Surgeons*. The VAS met with strong opposition from the monolithic BMA which demanded that all members of the VAS had to be members of the BMA. The threat of the BMA was ignored, and the VAS quietly went about its business.

At the 11th Australasian Medical Congress which met in Brisbane the same year, Hamilton Russell moved a resolution to give effect to Barnett’s proposal of an Australasian surgical association because Barnett could not get to the meeting. Hamilton Russell’s words were: “...The time has arrived for considering the desirability of forming an Australasian surgical

association with the object of *raising the standard* of surgery in Australia.” Gordon Craig of Sydney made an amendment. He wanted a section of surgery in every branch of the BMA in Australia and in New Zealand instead of a separate body of surgeons. Barnett’s proposal was defeated because it sounded too much like the VAS “closed shop”. Craig’s amendment was well received because every BMA member could then also go to meetings of the surgical section. Neither proposal passed.

Within the Congress at that time, the loyalty of members of the Surgical Section to the BMA was not unexpected because nearly all of them were at the same time members of the BMA, and a good number were either members of the federal committee or office bearers of the state committees. George Syme, like Craig, was also opposed to Barnett’s idea at first. So strong was the pro-BMA lobby that Henry Newland of Adelaide, who was to become the second president of the College, said “the formation of a new association would be a dagger in the heart of the BMA”.



The opening ceremony



AGM Sydney, 1938

“Of more significance was the principal that the new Australasian body of surgeons would not be an appendage of the BMA, the Royal College of Surgeons of England or the American College of Surgeons”

In 1924, William Mayo and Franklin Martin visited Melbourne. They were major players in the founding of the American College of Surgeons in 1913. During the visit, Martin lauded the success of the American College, and the seeds of a possible Australasian College of Surgeons with some semblance to the American College were sown. Afterwards, they invited eight Australian and New Zealand surgeons to attend the Annual Meeting of the American College of 1925. While in America, Hugh Devine went on a cruise in Mayo's houseboat down the Mississippi. During this cruise, Mayo said to Devine: “My boy, go home and found your own College and make it fit into your own Australasian conditions and circumstances.” Devine returned to Melbourne fired with the enthusiasm to found a “college of surgeons” worthy of the high ideals he embraced. He was an eloquent man, and many colleagues, including Syme fell to his persuasion. The importance of Syme could not be underestimated. He had just retired, and he was the doyen of surgery at that time. He commanded enormous respect from all, including

the surgeons of NSW and New Zealand. Above all, the BMA trusted Syme.

Because of the intense pressure from the BMA, the VSA capitulated to become the Surgical Section of the Victorian BMA in 1925. However, Syme, Russell and Devine had other ideas, and they drafted and signed the now famous “Foundation Letter” of November 19, which was sent to

the surgeons of all public hospitals in Australia and in New Zealand. The opening sentences were: “Senior surgeons and surgical specialists in all the states of Australia have noticed with much concern, a growing disregard by younger practitioners of recognized ethics in Surgical Practice, combined with a spirit of commercialism tending to degrade the high tradition of the surgical profession. Difficult and dangerous surgical operations are undertaken by practitioners who have not been properly trained in surgical principles and practice, and who divide fees with colleagues who refer the patients to them.”

Eighty-one surgeons responded. They were to become the Foundation Fellows of the College.

The following year, 1926, was a very busy one for these Fellows. New Zealand had decided officially to join Australia in this venture. Among the tasks was the writing of the constitution and the problem regarding finance. There was the threat of litigation by those members of the BMA who had no higher surgical qualification but wished to join this renegade body. This was of major concern because there was no examination for admission to membership at that time. The lack of an entry examination might also have been the reason that some of the senior surgeons favoured the model of the American College, and others were impressed by the emphasis of the American College on the practical issues of surgery and the raising of the standard of surgical care in (American) hospitals. In addition, they had to decide where the headquarters would be situated and what the name of this new body of surgeons would be.

The deliberations of these Foundation Fellows in April and August that year spanned the issues of trying to found a surgical body with minimal disruption to the general medical fraternity and appease the hostility of the BMA. The terms “Guild” and “Society”

were considered but rejected. A proposal for “voluntary incorporation” of individuals was not considered because it would lack the authority of an organization. It was also suggested that a senior surgical degree might be accomplished through the proposed University of Canberra. The degree would be given *ad eundem gradum*. This was deemed unsatisfactory. Of more significance was the principal that the new Australasian body of surgeons would not be an appendage of the BMA, the Royal College of Surgeons of England or the American College of Surgeons. In Melbourne, the surgeons had used the term “Association,” while their Sydney counterparts favoured the term “College;” hence, the proposal “Australasian College of Surgeons.” The name “The College of Surgeons of Australasia” was introduced and was written into the minutes of a meeting on June 1, 1926. In addition, the minutes of a meeting in August, that year, stated: “That members of the College be designated as Fellows and be entitled to place after their names the letters F.C.S.A. (Fellow of the College of Surgeons of Australasia, which includes New Zealand).



The exam supervisor, Mr Preston



The executive committee



