

PRESTIGIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

John Mitchell Crouch Fellowship

Rarely does one person's decision have such a profoundly positive impact on so many people as that made by Mrs Elisabeth Unsworth when she chose to fund an annual College Fellowship in memory of her son.

The John Mitchell Crouch Fellowship is the College's most prestigious scholarship, funding some of the best surgical scholars and surgical research within Australasia.

Comprising a generous \$60,000 to each year's recipient, (which will become \$70,000 in 2007) the Fellowship has boosted the early careers of internationally renowned surgical scholars, allowing them to conduct research to save and prolong countless lives.

Named after her son, a promising neurosurgeon who sadly died at 36 from a brain tumour, Mrs Unsworth chose to award the Fellowship to those making an outstanding contribution to the advancement of surgery or anaesthesia or to fundamental scientific research in the field.

Specifically, the Fellowship is awarded only to those working actively in his/her field, it must be used to assist the continuation of that work, the grantee must be a Fellow of the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons and in most circumstances be aged under 50 years.

Since the Fellowship's inception in 1977, outstanding candidates have used the financial support to advance medical knowledge in such fields as transplant immunology, microsurgery, colorectal cancer surgery and the promotion of healing in post-operative patients.

But according to the first recipient of the Fellowship, Professor Robert Burton, the bequest also changed the College and the future of surgical science.

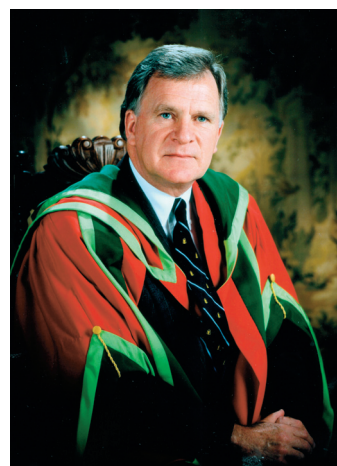
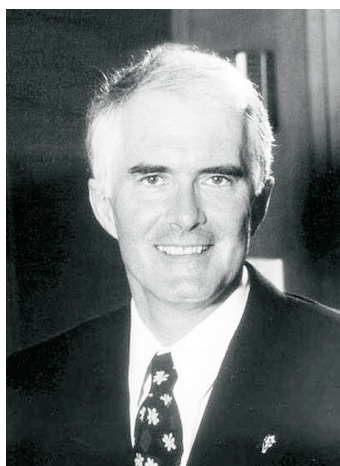
Professor Burton, the renowned Foundation Professor of Surgical Science at the University of Newcastle, received the Fellowship in 1979 when he was working at the Transplantation Unit of the Massachusetts General Hospital, Harvard University, Boston. The funds supported him in that work for a year before he returned to Australia.

He said the decision by Mrs Unsworth to focus on younger surgeons and the RACS choice to award him the Fellowship was not only a great honour but a watershed in its history.

"This was the first and most generous of the Fellowships that were available at the time and there simply was nothing else like it," Professor Burton said.

"This was more than just an endowment to the College because its remit was to support younger surgeons when such funding could make a significant difference.

"But more symbolically, selecting me represented a profound catalyst for change within the College because I was unashamedly a fundamental scientist."



Professor Burton said this was extremely significant at the time given that surveys of surgeons in the 1970s indicated that only one-third had a higher degree.

He said many surgeons did not then see scientific research in their fields as pivotal.

“This was a watershed for the College in that it chose in the first instance, with one of its most prestigious Fellowships, to give it to a surgeon/scientist and it represented a break from any perception that such grants were awarded to surgeons for the good work they had already done.

“It did not matter who I was or what I did, it made a huge statement about the importance of science to surgery.”

Now, after almost 30 years, the list of names of recipients of the John Mitchell Crouch Fellowship reads like a “who’s who” of Australasian surgical science.

It includes Professor Wayne Morrison, the Hugh Devine Professor and Head, Department of Surgery, University of Melbourne and St Vincent’s Hospital, Melbourne (1992); Professor James Toouli, Professor of Surgery, Gastrointestinal Surgical Unit, Department of Surgery, Flinders Medical Centre (1994); and Associate Professor Michael Agrez, University of Newcastle (2000).

Professor Graham Hill, the former Professor and Head of the Department of Surgery at the Auckland School of Medicine received the Fellowship in 1984 in support of his research into the metabolic management of patients undergoing major surgery.

Much of that research is now common patient management.

He said the funding, while partly awarded in recognition of the work he had already done in the field in the UK, helped him set up the first such specialist unit in the world.

“This Fellowship helped wonderfully in establishing a laboratory here in Auckland,” Professor Hill said.

“At the time we had scratched around to find some funding but there were lots of loose ends and our progress was greatly enhanced by the funds attached.

“In turn, that meant we could start floating ideas, we could get to work, we had the time to explore brilliant ideas as they arose without losing the momentum by having to write out long and complicated

funding applications and then having to wait up to 18 months to find out if we were successful.

“It also meant that the unit was much better able to attract bright surgeons and scientists.”

This year’s recipient of the John Mitchell Crouch Fellowship is Professor Julian Smith, a Professor of Surgery at Monash University, Melbourne, and Head of the Cardiothoracic Unit at the Monash Medical Centre.

He said he is using the Fellowship money to fund three research projects, which cover a broad spectrum of his interests from cardiothoracic surgery to surgical education.

“The first project is looking at cognitive function and recovery after the different types of cardiac surgery to see if there is a difference so that we can both advise people what to expect or modify the surgery to alleviate such effects,” he said.

“The second project is looking at how surgeons incorporate evidence-based medicine into their practice to find out how surgeons acquire information, whether they embrace new information or procedures and whether there are barriers to this.

“And finally we are looking at how the insight of trainees influences their training.

“Some surgical educators have noticed that some trainees lack insight into their capacities and their skills levels and therefore their own training needs.

“If we can understand the role of insight we hope to be able to devise educational and training tools to remediate such issues.”

Professor Hill said he was honoured to have received the Fellowship and grateful for the financial support.

“Without the Fellowship I suppose we would have stumbled along somehow but this money represents a significant injection of funds to help us move these projects ahead,” he said.

“One joins very exalted company as a recipient of this Fellowship, far higher achievers than I am, but I am very glad to have been given the nod.”

Professor Graham Hill has recently written a book, now available through the College, called “Surgeon Scientist – Surgical Research” about his career and the development of science as a central component of surgery.



Some of the John Mitchell Crouch Fellowship recipients – all leaders in their field.
From left:
Professor Julian Smith,
Professor Robert Burton,
Professor James Toouli,
Professor Graham Hill,
Professor David Goffey,
Professor Wayne Morrison,
Mr Michael Agrez